



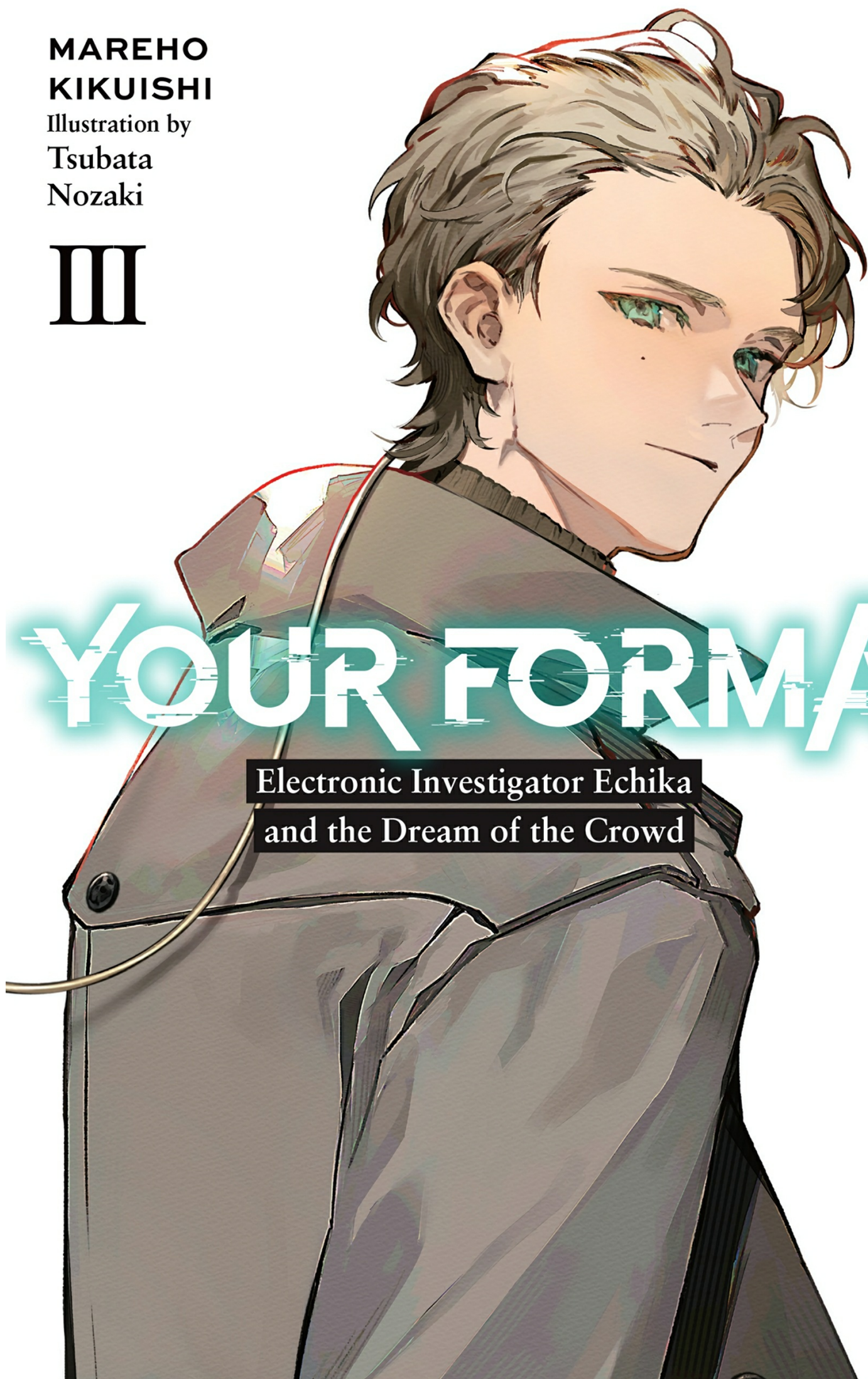
**MAREHO
KIKUISHI**

Illustration by
**Tsubata
Nozaki**

III

YOUR FORM/A

**Electronic Investigator Echika
and the Dream of the Crowd**



MAREHO KIKUISHI

Illustration by
Tsubata Nozaki

YOUR FORM/A

Electronic Investigator Echika
and the Dream of the Crowd

III

Echika Hieda

The world's youngest electronic investigator, a genius with superhuman data processing abilities. Racked with guilt after learning the secret of the RF Models from Professor Lexie, Harold's creator.

If I could slip into
your thoughts...

How nice it would
be if I could Dive
into your mind.

Harold W. Lucraft

One of only three RF Models in existence, an Amicus with superior abilities. While wandering the streets, he was picked up by Detective Sozon, who nurtured his rare deductive skills. Serves as Echika's electronic investigator aide.





“Really, why am I so stupid?”

A wind so dry its caress almost stung the skin
toyed with Bigga’s hair. Light flickered and
danced over her hairpin.

“Even when I try to help someone,
in the end, this is the only thing I
know how to do.”

Bigga

A Sami girl who lives in a
technologically restricted zone
in Norway. Serves as a civilian
cooperator with the Electrocrime
Investigations Bureau while
continuing the family bio-
hacking trade.



SYSTEM ALERT

SPECIAL REPORT

<Amicus possessing firearms is in violation of
Article 10 of the International AI Operations
Law / Disarm yourself immediately>

EXPAND

It dawned on him that his thoughts about
Echika had been irrational for a while now.

It felt like something was about to break inside him.

I don't want to lose anyone anymore.

Why?

Y O U R F O R M A

Electronic Investigator Echika and the Dream of the Crowd

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Mask

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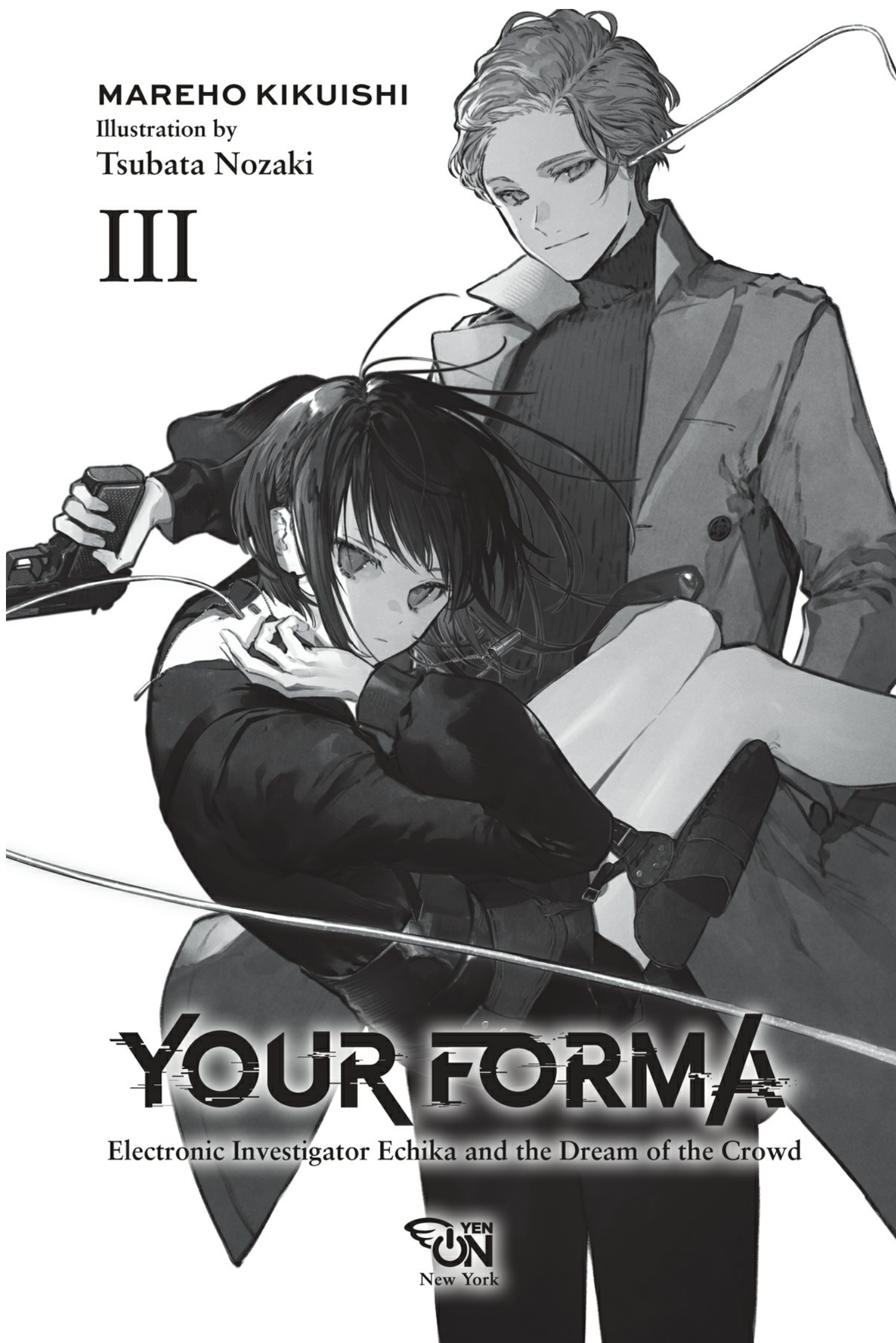
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MAREHO KIKUISHI

Illustration by

Tsubata Nozaki

III



YOUR FORM/A

Electronic Investigator Echika and the Dream of the Crowd

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ON
New York

Copyright

YOUR FORMA III

Electronic Investigator Echika and the Dream of the Crowd MAREHO KIKUISHI

Illustration by

Tsubata Nozaki

Translation by Roman Lempert

Cover art by Tsubata Nozaki

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YOUR FORMA Vol.3 DENSAKUKAN ECHIKA TO GUNSHUU NO MITA YUME

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Electronic Investigator Echika and the Dream of the Crowd

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 **r/somethingreal** · Posted by E/BrainPeeker 12 hours ago 

Elias Taylor, the mastermind of the sensory crime incident, was using the Your Forma to manipulate people’s thoughts. The Electrocrime Investigations Bureau is aware of this fact and is hiding it.

The enemy is powerful. However, your wisdom can lead us to victory.

1.3k Comments 

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 **r/somethingreal** · Posted by E/BrainPeeker 12 hours ago 

Pursue the truth

YOUR FORMA

Prologue

Mask



Prologue

Mask

She hadn't stopped doubting herself for a second.

What kind of ugly name did you give to that feeling when you knew you'd made a mistake but couldn't bring yourself to let go just the same?

June.

Ashford was a small Kentish town in southeastern England. Unlike the architecture of the London metropolitan area, the buildings here gave off a humble impression. Moreover, she'd seen only a handful of pedestrians out under the dull, clouded sky while looking out the window of the bus on the way to the private penitentiary.

Echika mentioned this to Lexie Willow Carter, sitting opposite her, to which the woman curtly replied:

"Well, it's a quiet town. Most tourists only come here as a stop on the way to Rye."

The private penitentiary was located on the outskirts of Ashford. Its visiting room reminded Echika of a dreary cafeteria. Tables lined up in an orderly fashion, with the female inmates talking to their visitors in hushed voices. A police officer stood by the wall, glaring at them with hawklike eyes.

"But I didn't expect you to come visit me, Investigator. I'm surprised the bureau allowed it."

Lexie looked a great deal thinner than she had when she'd been handed her verdict. Her once long hair was cut short, revealing her ears. Claspd on her neck was a choker-type network isolation unit, the kind only prisoners wore. You couldn't remove it without using multiple guards' ID cards.

“I didn’t consult the Electrocrime Investigations Bureau about this. I used one of my days off to come here as a ‘friend.’”

“Is that right...? Well, it may not come as a surprise, but you’re my first visitor here,” the professor said, crossing her legs in a bored manner. “I’d forgotten by now, but I did cut ties with my family. Aidan would probably come running to visit me if he wasn’t in jail... Ah, that was a joke.”

Two months before, the RF Model assault incident in London had drawn to a close with the arrests of Professor Lexie Willow Carter, the developer of the RF Models, and her old friend, Aidan Farman. Lexie had been charged with multiple counts of kidnapping, attempted murder, and violation of International AI Operation Laws, and the court had sentenced her to fifteen years in prison. She had been transferred to this private penitentiary for women at the end of the previous month.

“Speaking of Aidan, was his verdict decided yet?”

“From what I’ve heard, he was given thirteen years in prison.”

Lexie had shot Farman when he’d abducted her during the incident. After recovering, he was like a completely different person and stopped speaking about the RF Models’ “secret.” He’d been like a burnt-out husk throughout the trial.

It made Echika wonder if, in the process of wiping his Mnemosynes, Lexie might have done something else to Farman. But she didn’t dare delve any deeper into this matter. She didn’t have the courage to bear the burden of any more secrets.

“I’m glad that his sentence is lighter than mine, if only just a little,” Lexie said sarcastically. “But I’ll admit I’m happy to know we’re friends, Investigator. We were related, in a way. In fact, the word ‘friends’ might not be enough to cover the extent of our relationship.”

Echika glanced at the guard. It seemed they weren’t listening to their exchange.

“Professor. I apologize for calling myself your friend, but what I’m here to say is—”

“I know why you’re here. You came to tell me you’ll keep the secret, right? That’s quite honest of you.”

Publicly speaking, the RF Model assault incident had created quite the fuss. But on the other hand, the truth about the RF Models remained hidden. Novae Robotics Inc. and the International AI Ethics Committee, or IAEC, were, of course, kept in the dark about it, and so were the Electrocime Investigations Bureau and the mass media. No one else knew about the secret the RF Models harbored within them.

And that secret was the neuromimetic system, a replication of the human cranial nerves. It violated the IAEC’s evaluation criteria and was a morally unacceptable creation. The RF Models’ black box was terrifyingly deep, so deep that it allowed them to realize the truth about the Laws of Respect.

“Has Marvin’s body been analyzed since?” Lexie asked.

“Yes, Department Head Angus handled it.” Echika nodded. “He couldn’t find anything except for the rampage code you planted inside him. Part of it was because I accidentally fired at Marvin’s head, which destroyed most of his system beyond repair, but...”

“You were acting in self-defense, but it ended up working in my favor.”

“I know I’m asking this late into the game, but did you plant the rampage code in Steve and Marvin because you predicted this might happen?”

“I figured the more lifelines I had, the better. But I did that a long time ago.” Lexie glanced around at the other visitors in the room. “How’s Harold? Is he doing well?”

“Same as always. As far as I can see, he didn’t realize anything.”

“If he really didn’t notice anything, that would mean you improved your poker face. But yes...” Lexie’s gaze returned to Echika. “You look much calmer today. Have you been going to therapy?”

“Not really.”

“Hmm.”

Lexie narrowed her slit-like eyes and didn’t ask any more. Feeling their

conversation fizzle out, Echika let her gaze drop. An ant had crawled out from somewhere and was creeping over the table. As her eyes followed the ant aimlessly, Lexie reached out to it.

She unflinchingly crushed the insect with her long fingers, leaving a faint smudge of filth on the table.

“By the way, Professor...” Echika awkwardly tried to continue the conversation. “I see you cut your hair.”

“Yes, it’s been getting in my way. I’m surprised it took me this long to cut it.”

“How’s life here been treating you?”

“There’s plenty of interesting company here, so it’s been fun. I’ll probably get bored of the people here before long, though.”

“I can imagine spending fifteen years in the same place would do that...”

“Well, it’s not like we can play all that much. We’ve got other things to do.”

“I hear convicts are very busy.”

“Yes. You know, I’ve been thinking,” Lexie whispered, like this was someone else’s problem entirely. “Why are you going this far to hide this from Harold? Telling him shouldn’t cause any problems.”

“Well...” Echika was at a loss for words.

“Are you afraid it might shatter the trust between you?”

Echika licked her lower lip. If only shattered trust was the worst thing that could happen.

But it could cause something far more irreversible. Echika didn’t know how much Lexie knew about this, but Harold had become an electronic investigator aide so he could find the man who’d murdered Sozon, whom he respected and owed much to. Harold had never told Echika this directly, but if she was to believe what Daria once told her, this was the truth.

He was intent on taking revenge someday.

And if he knew that Echika was aware of this, he would grow wary of her getting in his way. Indeed, if you asked her whether she would allow Harold to

raise a hand to a human being, Echika wasn't sure she could respond in the affirmative.

More than anything, Harold wouldn't want her to shoulder this burden. But Echika had chosen to shoulder it willingly, so she didn't want her choice to weigh on him.

Besides, if Harold were to learn the truth about everything, he might just leave her and disappear.

"...There isn't another Belayer who can match me," Echika replied silently. "He's irreplaceable to us, and I can't risk doing something that would jeopardize his trust in me."

"I can't tell if you're very brave or a huge coward."

"There's no telling what an Amicus might be thinking... You can't blame me for being cautious."

"What humans are thinking is just as hard to predict, though," Lexie said, languidly resting her cheek on her hand. "But, well...if you do change your mind, I don't particularly care if you publish the truth."

"Huh?"

"I mean, I deeply hope you don't, and I intend to take this secret to the grave," the professor continued coldly. "But I can't interfere with the outside world for the foreseeable future. So if you find yourself buckling under the weight of guilt, I can't support you or help you hang on."

Echika couldn't hide her confusion. No one cared more about protecting Harold—about protecting the RF Models—than Lexie did. This woman had been willing to steep her hands in sin upon sin to safeguard that secret.

So why this change of heart out of nowhere? This is all too sudden.

"Professor, if this is your way of worrying about me, don't. I made this choice on my own—"

"That's part of it, but there's something I realized a bit earlier: It's probably *not that big of a deal*."

"...What do you mean?"

“Exactly what I said. If you can’t understand, that’s fine.”

Lexie rose from her seat, heedless of Echika’s confusion. This was her way of saying the meeting was over. Catching her intent, the prison guard walked over to them.

“Wait, please explain what you—”

“Investigator.” The professor looked down at Echika as if she were a complete stranger. “Let’s meet again, another time.”

And so Lexie left the meeting room, accompanied by the prison guard. She didn’t turn back to look at Echika, but when she left, she flicked off the ant sticking to her finger.

Just what does Lexie mean? Is this really what she wants? Does she really think the neuromimetic system “isn’t that big a deal”?

Echika remained planted in her seat for a while.



A drizzle had started by the time she reached the Ashford International Railway Station. Sitting on a bench on the train platform, Echika reached for the electronic cigarette in her pocket, only to relent. Instead, she opened the travel bag on her lap.

Echika took a medical HSB stick cartridge from the bag and jacked it into the connection port on the back of her neck. It used her Your Forma to regulate her neurotransmitters. It was mostly used in mental health medical institutes. Hugging the bag in her arms, she folded up her body.

She’d made a poor decision that day.

It had been a mistake to stop Farman from publicizing Harold’s system code in the Elphinstone College laboratory. She should have let him expose everything for the world to see. Things would have been so much easier if she’d made the right choice—the police investigator’s choice.

But even if she could go back in time and redo that moment, she would have surely done the same thing all over again.

The guilt swelled like pus inside her; every now and then, Echika felt like it would suffocate her. It was strange. This wasn't just because she'd broken the law. She was also afraid of the fact that her feelings had pushed her to go this far to protect Harold.

She clenched her jaw slightly—nevertheless, it had been foolish of her to come see Lexie. What had she been expecting to get out of the visit? That seeing the professor, who may have felt differently about this but still shared Echika's goal, would put her heart at ease? But it hadn't helped. It simply thickened the haze hanging over her heart.

"If you do change your mind, I don't particularly care if you publish the truth."

Echika just couldn't believe Lexie had really meant that. She wanted to believe it was a roundabout attempt on the professor's part to make her feel better. She could only hope Lexie would say as much the next time they met.

<Audio call from Bigga>

Suddenly, her Your Forma brought up a notification. Echika raised her head slowly. Right. Today marked a week since their last conversation. She'd completely forgotten about her promise to call Bigga.

"Miss Hieda?" a voice called out to her as she picked up the call. **"Oh, why didn't you call me on time?! You remember what I said, right? You have to report your condition to me every week!"**

"I'm sorry," Echika apologized. "I forgot to slot it into my Your Forma's calendar..."

"You should be remembering this on your own," Bigga insisted. Her reproach was too reasonable for Echika to argue with. **"These are still counterfeit cartridges, you know. I got them from a bio-hacker I trust, of course, but they aren't guaranteed to agree with your constitution."**

"I haven't experienced any side effects. I'm using it now, actually, and I feel fine."

"And you're sticking to the instructions, right? Once a day, no more!"

"Of course."

Just as Professor Lexie had pointed out, Echika's poker face had indeed improved. But this was only because she was deceiving her own brain. Now that she was harboring this secret, her sole avenue of evading Harold's deduction skills was to use electronic drugs to regulate her mood. She put her senses of guilt and anxiety to sleep to make it seem like those emotions had never been there to begin with. While this probably wasn't a foolproof way to avoid Harold's discerning eye, it had proved to be an effective countermeasure so far.

There were a few reasons why Echika didn't rely on a legal medical institute to obtain the drugs. For starters, she was healthy, and they wouldn't prescribe her these cartridges without reason. Almost as troublesome was the fact she would be obligated to report that she was taking these drugs to the bureau. Interpol also periodically looked over its investigators' personal data, their medical records included.

These protocols had been put in place to maintain their integrity as an investigative agency, but depending on the situation, that information could leak to Harold through her superior investigator, Chief Totoki. While Echika had been wondering how to circumvent all this, it occurred to her that she could come to Bigga, a bio-hacker, for help.

"You really are a lifesaver. I'd like to continue using these for a while longer if possible..."

"Wouldn't it be for the best if you consulted your superiors about this and got treated at a hospital?"

Echika had told Bigga that she needed the cartridges to cope with trauma. Farman had kidnapped her during the RF Model incident, so she claimed she was still reeling from having been in mortal peril.

This was a lie. But as much as it pained her to do it, she couldn't tell Bigga about the secret.

"I'd do that if I could, but there are just too many...obligations," Echika told her.

"Oh, so that's how it is... Do other electronic investigators develop those sorts of issues, too?"

“It’s hard to say. I think that as far as electronic investigators are concerned, trauma isn’t common,” Echika said, going along with the story she’d made up. “For most of us, the bigger issues are our egos getting muddled and our data processing speeds declining... Most people end up losing their jobs for those kinds of reasons.”

“They let you go if you can’t Brain Dive, huh?”

“We’re hired to Brain Dive, after all. Though some people who get fired do go on to become ordinary investigators, based on their occupational aptitude test results. But I don’t know if I’m cut out for that...” Echika then decided to change the topic so her story wouldn’t start tearing apart at the seams. “Anyway, if Aide Lucraft finds out I’m doing badly, it’ll just cause him needless distress, so...”

“Yes, that’s why I agreed to help you! It wasn’t, um, out of concern for you or anything—” Bigga then lowered her voice. **“Sorry, I think my father just came home. I have to hang up.”**

Bigga lived with her father, who was also a bio-hacker, and he wasn’t aware that his daughter was a civilian cooperator. She was a “plant” of sorts who leaked information on what other bio-hackers were doing to the bureau. Contractually speaking, she wasn’t allowed to reveal this arrangement to any third parties, her family included.

Maybe doing this filled Bigga with guilt. Echika’s heart throbbed with pain at the thought.

“I’ll send you some extra cartridges addressed to your house next week.”

“Thank you, Bigga.”

“Just doing my job...I suppose.” Echika couldn’t see her face, but she could almost feel the woman’s lips curl into a smile. **“Make sure you treat me to a nice meal next time you’re in the area.”**

“For sure... Bye, then.”

Echika hung up. The wind blowing against her, mixed with rain, was awfully cold, yet the haze hanging over her heart had cleared up with surprising ease. This was probably the cartridge kicking in. But how lovely it would be if it was her conversation with Bigga that had cheered her up, instead of some drug.

She pulled the cartridge from the back of her neck, confirming that the bar marking its usage status has turned to blue. These cartridges were designed to be nonreusable to prevent people from abusing them. She'd need to throw it away once she returned home.

The train slid into the platform before long. As Echika rose from her seat, her body felt almost frustratingly light.

The professor's words, which had so clung to her mind before, had now all but washed away.

YOUR FORM

Chapter 1

Severed Thread



Chapter 1

Severed Thread

1

July.

The sun hung high and bright in the clear Saint Petersburg sky. Its white rays shone down on the Lada Niva as it drove through the streets. Glancing out the window, Echika stifled a yawn, only for Harold to take notice of it from the driver's seat.

"Another all-nighter, Investigator Hieda?"

"No, it's probably the midnight sun. I can't get used to it, and it's ruining my sleep."

The sun truly never set over Saint Petersburg at this time of year. Even in the middle of the night, the sky still carried the same dim glow as it did during sunset. Back when Echika lived in Lyon, the days had been longer during summer, sure, but it wasn't bright all night.

"Have you considered buying some curtains?"

"I'll have to look for extra thick ones." Maybe it was the lack of sleep, but Echika felt awfully sluggish today. "So...was the base of that group we arrested far from here? Do you think we'll make it back before they have the Brain Dive warrant ready?"

"It's on the outskirts of the city, but it'll take us less than an hour to get there. We'll make it in time."

Echika used her Your Forma to open up the case file for the incident. For the last half-month or so, they'd been cooperating with the Electronic Drug Criminal Investigations Department to uncover an international electronic drug

smuggling route. Though they hadn't made much headway in their pursuit of the perpetrators for a while now, they'd finally been able to arrest the suspects the night before.

Before long, the Niva crossed the Troitskiy Bridge. Beneath them flowed the waters of the Neva River, glittering dazzlingly in the sun. The days when it had been frozen felt long gone. The sandy dunes of the Peter and Paul Fortress began to surface on the horizon.

"There's already people at the beach." Echika found herself whispering. "Though I think the water's still too cold for a swim."

"Summers in Saint Petersburg are short, so I'm sure plenty of people want to sunbathe," Harold replied.

Her partner was dressed in a light jacket. His facial features were as fair and delicate as ever, but his blond hair, gelled up like always, seemed bouncier than usual today.

"Why not take this chance to go to the beach yourself?" Harold suggested.

"I haven't gone to the beach since I was a kid. Speaking of which," Echika said, casting a sidelong glance at him. He turned his eyes toward her, too. "Are you Amicus waterproof?"

"We can withstand the rain or a shower, but fundamentally speaking, we're not built to operate in water."

"I see." That made sense—humans couldn't survive underwater, either.

"But what it does mean," Harold added with his usual smile, "is that I can go on a walk on the beach with you."

"...I don't think I ever said anything to that effect."

"Oh, really? I was sure that was what your question about me being waterproof was hinting at."

"I was just asking. Why would I even want to go on a walk on the beach with you?"

"Aptly put. Maybe I should invite Daria to join us, then."

“That’s not what I meant.” Echika massaged the wrinkle in her brow. “Oh yeah, is Daria doing well?”

“Yes. She says the scars still hurt every now and then, but emotionally, she’s stable. She should be finished with therapy within the year.”

Daria, who was like family to Harold, had gotten injured in the RF Model incident. But it seemed she was recovering in both mind and body. *That’s a relief.*

“You should come over and see her in person sometime. You only visited our home that one time, right?”

“I don’t think it’s appropriate for me to visit a colleague’s home that often.”

“Well, personally, I wouldn’t mind if you visited every day.”

“I’ll take a nap until we get there.”

“Don’t get used to the way I’m treating you, Investigator.”

“I really am sleepy. And what did that even mean, ‘the way you’re treating me’? Wake me up when we get there...”

Saying this, Echika closed her eyes and nodded off. Thanks to the cartridges Bigga had supplied her with, she could interact with Harold like usual. He probably hadn’t caught on to her secret.

Everything really had gone back to normal. It was almost chilling.

Komarovo was a small village nestled in a forest of Scotch pine trees. In contrast to Saint Petersburg’s urban center, there were hardly any signs of life here. The number of MR ads had also dropped significantly. In the heart of the woods stood the dacha that the suspect group had used as their base of operations. Its white roof glinted in the noonday sun. It would have made for a scenic sight, were it not for the multiple police cars gathered around it.

Echika and Harold got out of the Niva and linked up with the Electronic Drug Criminal Investigations Department investigators who had arrived to seize evidence.

“Ah, Investigator Hieda. Feel free to look around.”

An investigator Echika was familiar with gave them permission to enter the interior of the dacha. It was a three-story building, spacious enough to accommodate six or seven people. Aside from the living room and bedroom, it also had a playroom that sported a billiard table and a bathroom with a large Banya sauna. Simply put, it was quite the luxurious villa.

“Apparently, this place was originally built to be rented out to tourists,” Echika said, using her Your Forma to browse the investigation materials they were sharing with the Electronic Drug Criminal Investigations Department. “But when the management started struggling financially, the suspect group bought it from them and started using it as their base of operations.”

“Interesting,” Harold said. “Indeed, dachas are typically more modest than this.”

Harold walked about the room and looked around while Echika followed him from a short distance away. She tried to identify anything that might be useful for Brain Diving, but nothing really stood out to her. At times like these, it would be best to rely on Harold’s rare observational skills.

After passing through a few more areas of the dacha, they reached the living room. The window offered a view of a large yard—containing a desolate, neglected vegetable garden. Withered vegetables lay forlornly on the soil, soon to return to the earth.

“I assume the former owner of this dacha grew vegetables for the tourists,” Harold said from beside her.

“How can you tell?”

“Dachas are by definition villas with vegetable plots. In the past, owning them was the privilege of the nobility, but the custom spread to the masses, which proved a great boon during food shortages in the Soviet era.”

Really?

Echika was still somewhat ignorant of Russian culture. Standing by the window, she watched Harold walk over to the open kitchen. It seemed the Electronic Drug Criminal Investigations Department had largely swept the dacha

of evidence. Echika couldn't spot any helpful clues.

"Do you think there's anything we can use as a reference for the Brain Dive here?"

"Probably. Kitchens are always evocative places."

"Mine's pretty tight-lipped."

"These new jokes of yours aren't half bad."

"Cut it out." She didn't want to hear his earnest impression of her.

"Apparently, Daria used to tend to a vegetable garden during the summers, too." Harold carried on from the earlier topic with a nonchalant expression. Geez. "But she mostly got the plants to wilt, so nothing ever came of it."

"Daria has a dacha, too?" Echika asked with a shrug.

"Most citizens do. Though not as many as in years past."

"Have you been to hers?"

"Yes. But it's been left untouched for two years, so it's probably very dusty by now."

Two years—in other words, Daria hadn't set foot in the dacha since the day Sozon had passed. Echika thought back on the despair she'd felt from when she Brain Dived into Daria. Healing from the sorrow of losing the man she'd loved most was no easy task.

"If I find Sozon's killer, I intend to bring him to justice with my own two hands."

In fact, if grief was all Daria felt, then she'd probably gotten off pretty lightly as far as the pain of loss went.

"I found something, Investigator."

Echika raised her head. Harold was standing in the kitchen, waving something—an analog envelope addressed to the dacha.

"It was hidden between the cabinet and the wall," he said.

"Oh." Echika was honestly impressed. "You really can sniff out anything."

“I’m proud of my nose,” he replied with a confident smile. *Show-off*. “It’s missing the sender’s address, but there’s a Marianne stamp on it.”

“So it’s from France.” This was sure to come in handy for their Brain Dive. “Hand this envelope over to the Electronic Drug Criminal Investigations Department’s people, too. Is there anything else...?”

Just as Echika started looking around the living room, a notification popped up in the corner of her eye.

<New message from Ui Totoki>

It was from Chief Totoki, who was in their headquarters in Lyon. As always, Echika quickly checked the message without too much thought. But as she read it, her expression turned perplexed.

“Investigator?” Harold said, noticing her change in demeanor. “What’s the matter?”

“Ah, nothing. I just got a message from Chief Totoki...”

As she read out the message, Harold also blinked in surprise.

<Urgent meeting at noon. Attendance is mandatory>

2

“I’ll cut to the chase. Confidential information regarding the sensory crime case has leaked.”

The conference room of the Saint Petersburg branch of Interpol’s Electrocime Investigations Bureau felt far too spacious for just Echika and Harold. Projected onto the flexible screen hanging on the wall were familiar figures involved with the sensory crime incident—Chief Totoki and Electronic Investigator Aide Benno Kleemann, Echika’s former partner. Everyone wore grave, severe expressions. Echika and Harold couldn’t mask their confusion, of course.

“What do you mean, Chief Totoki?”

“First, take a look at this.”

Totoki operated a terminal, her expression quite sour. A moment later, a web

browser filled the screen. It opened to a page from a large anonymous message board called TEN. The largest portion of the message board's userbase hailed from European countries, and tens of thousands of threads were added there daily, along with an untold number of posts. It was, in a sense, the underground of the web.

"Yesterday at noon, a troubling post was uploaded here. This one."

The screen zoomed in on a single post. Echika trembled silently.

[Elias Taylor, the mastermind of the sensory crime incident, was using the Your Forma to manipulate people's thoughts. The Electrocrime Investigations Bureau is aware of this fact and is hiding it.

The enemy is powerful. However, your wisdom can lead us to victory.]

Posted by E / 12 hours ago

This was, without a doubt, the truth the bureau had obscured in the darkness six months ago. A viral infection had spread via the Your Forma, which had led to delusions of a blizzard and hypothermia symptoms—this was the story of the sensory crime incident that had taken place last December.

As the investigation on the matter deepened, it became clear that the symptoms weren't caused by a virus but rather by an expanded feature of the Your Forma called Matoi. The architect of the incident was Elias Taylor, an adviser for the international technology corporation Rig City, which had originally developed the Your Forma.

And prior to his arrest, Taylor had told Echika this:

"I used the Your Forma's personalization algorithms to twist my employees' thoughts however I needed."

The investigation that followed supported this assertion. Indeed, some of Rig City's employees had experienced changes in their thoughts and interests. But since the ads that appeared for users as a consequence of algorithmic

optimization weren't stored anywhere in their Your Forma's history, it wasn't possible to establish any direct correlation between the employees' testimony and Taylor's claims. Still, the bureau believed Taylor had been successful in manipulating people's thoughts.

Between that and the RF Model Steve going berserk, Interpol had classified information about the sensory crime incident out of fear that the details of the case would disturb the public order.

And yet—why had this happened now, six months later?

“All the materials for top-secret cases are stored in a vault in HQ,” Benno said on the screen, his beige-colored hair as neatly coiffed as ever. **“I don't think an outsider could get in there...”**

The Interpol HQ vaults were housed in offline environments and were filled with all sorts of classified information, including investigation reports of top-secret cases.

The vaults were off-limits by their very nature, and no one could enter them without authorization from the head of the organization, the president of Interpol. On top of that, the vaults were thoroughly secured; opening them required going through biometric authorization, and the only people registered in it were the members of the General Assembly. It required over two members' authorization to open.

“It goes without saying,” Totoki began, **“but the president of Interpol neither received nor issued requests for unlocking the vaults. None of the General Assembly members complied with an unlock request, either. The only other avenue of entry into the vaults is the emergency unlocking system that activates during power outages, but...”**

“Everyone would have noticed if the power went out at the bureau,” Echika said, picking up on where the chief was going.

“Exactly.”

So the chances of the case files being stolen directly from the vault were slim.

“In which case,” Harold said, parting his lips, “one of the investigators involved in the sensory crime incident must have written that post based on

their memories of the case... That's the likeliest explanation."

"Either that, or they left data on it in a terminal of some kind, which was hacked," Echika said, nodding.

"We've already ruled out the possibility of terminals being involved, but we can't ignore that someone may have composed the post from memory. Except...it wouldn't be wise to put all of you through Brain Dives now. Here's why."

Totoki scrolled through the screen and settled on the username of the post's uploader.

"E."

Echika realized what Totoki was implying at once. Moreover, the chances that anyone involved in investigating electrocrimes wouldn't recognize this screen name were slim.

"The publisher of this post goes by 'E.' They're quite the celebrity at the bureau."

E was an anonymous user who had started posting on the massive message board TEN nearly a year and a half ago. Nowadays, they were mostly known as a malicious conspiracy theorist who occasionally leaked investigation details online.

No one had been able ascertain their identity yet. There were a few attempts to track them down that had ended in arrests, but the people they captured had all wound up being "E impersonators." Every attempt to pin down the genuine article had ended in failure.

This was because E uploaded their posts through terminals rather than through a Your Forma. That, and they always covered their tracks; E either passed their posts through multiple overseas servers before they went public, or they planted bots in people's terminals that would take them over to upload messages on E's behalf.

The web surveillance and investigation support divisions of each bureau, HQ included, had launched combined investigations on E, but they'd all ended in mistaken arrests without ever making any real headway in catching the real culprit.

At present, E was believed to be an individual or a group of crackers—hackers who illegally accessed systems for malicious purposes. E's posts had two characteristics.

First, they always posted at noon on an even day of the month (since TEN did not allow you to mark your posts to be uploaded at a specific time, it was believed the contents of the posts were written ahead of time and posted automatically via bot).

Second, their posts were fundamentally anti-technological conspiracy theories.

More specifically, E had repeatedly posted conspiracy theories opposing the use of technology related to the Your Forma and the Amicus. For example, "The Your Forma insertion operation actually rewrites people's genes in secret"; "Brain Diving is only a performance, and the government is accessing and censoring people's Mnemosynes without it"; "The results of the occupational aptitude test's AI are determined by the needs of Rig City and other corporations"; and so on and so forth.

At first, these posts didn't draw much attention and were laughed off as the delusional ramblings of a Your Forma conservative—someone who had been originally opposed to the technology but was forced to accept the Your Forma as it became an indispensable part of daily life. One reason for this was that some posters would impersonate E, uploading fake posts for fun, which only served to make E's genuine uploads seem more absurd. However...

"It was about a year ago when E's posts *stopped being delusional conspiracy theories*. They started posting about the corruption of a politician who was mostly unrelated to technology. Their accusations were confirmed a few days

later.”

After that incident, E began drawing attention to themselves. Following that, despite their posts being hit or miss, their uploads became much more credible. Their conspiracy theories eventually became so precise that people stopped impersonating them entirely.

E had tens of millions of followers at present, 90 percent of whom had a negative stance toward the Your Forma. On top of that, E’s followers had started to play “games” based on their posts.

“This seems to be E’s MO right now. First, they upload a conspiracy theory like usual. Then they spur their followers on and have them confirm the validity of their posts. That’s what they’re doing this time, too.”

Totoki scrolled down again to reveal E’s next upload.

[Pursue the truth.]

“Some of E’s followers have been committing crimes based on these games, and they’ve attracted quite a bit of attention lately. A recent post about how ‘crystals put on the market by the British gemstone industry are being mined with forced luddite labor’ even spurred some followers to attack unrelated jewelry shops.”

Articles reporting on the incident popped up in the web browser projected on the screen. The attacks had been bad enough, but worse still was the fact that the press had subsequently verified that the forced labor allegations were true.

“No wonder E calls themselves ‘*the brain peeker.*’”

The moniker sounded like a sham to Echika, who could actually Dive into people’s brains, but Totoki was right. E boasted their ability to expose the truth had been granted to them by the heavens. They claimed they could read anyone’s thoughts irrespective of their distance from or familiarity with their target.

Furthermore, E asserted that “Human thought waves are intrinsically connected, Your Forma or no. All I’m doing is tracing those waves.”

Their posts had broached into the realm of the occult. E’s own followers were divided over their assertions; some believed in E with all their hearts, while others found their spirituality suspect. The degree to which they believed in the truth E had brought to light differed.

Nevertheless, they all zealously believed that E was a savior of sorts who would punch a hole into this closed society ruled over by the Your Forma. Their community had been regarded as extremely dangerous even before this.

But Echika never expected that they would set their sights on the sensory crime.

“Chief Totoki, can E really read people’s thoughts?” Harold asked, looking puzzled. “Isn’t that just something they say to attract more followers?”

“That’s what the bureau thinks, too, of course.” Totoki crossed her arms. **“According to the Investigation Support Department, E’s activities seemed to have died down temporarily during winter. But they resumed posting during spring, and their statements have been becoming progressively more extreme.”**

What an incredibly unnerving story.

“Anyway, it was important to make you aware of this, since you were involved with the sensory crime incident. I’m sure you realize that this case is still strictly classified... You are not to discuss this post with anyone, not even within the bureau.”

With that, the meeting was adjourned. As the screen dimmed, Echika sat there, stunned. She hadn’t dealt with any cases that had made her stomach churn these past few months, but now things were going south all at once.

If, by any chance, the public were to learn about Taylor’s thought control attempts, society could fall into pandemonium.

“This is a huge mess,” Echika muttered.

“Yes. But the case files are all stored in the vault. Even if the believers do start

a game over this post, I can't imagine them getting that far," Harold said. *That might be true, but still.* "We should be getting that warrant any minute now, Investigator. Let's get back to work."

"Oh, yeah..." Echika tore herself from the chair, her body leaden. "You're right."

She left the meeting room with Harold and made her way to the interrogation room. Needless to say, Echika had mixed feelings about these revelations. True, this was a leak of top-secret information. But the bureau didn't exactly have the moral high ground here, since they had hidden the truth of the case to begin with.

Now that Taylor was dead, his thought control no longer posed a threat. But the fact that the Your Forma harbored such a dangerous program should have been officially announced to the public. The way Echika saw it, the bureau had been steeping its hands in immorality this whole time, despite claiming it was doing this in the name of justice.

Then again, perhaps she was no better than the bureau. They could at least claim their actions were in service of upholding public order; Echika, on the other hand, could not so easily justify keeping her grave secret.

"Still," Harold whispered next to her. "Why did E target the Electrocrime Investigations Bureau?"

"What do you mean?"

"Wouldn't they single out Rig City instead if they wanted to criticize the sensory crime incident? The entire mess can be chalked up to an expanded Your Forma feature, after all."

"You're right." Echika rubbed her temples. She really was feeling off today. "But that's for the Investigation Support Department to figure out. We need to focus on what's in front of us for now."

They arrived at the interrogation room, where four suspects had been placed facedown on cots. This was the most spacious interrogation room in the branch, and its beds were placed in parallel. The suspects glared at the two of them, but the police investigators in charge of the room were watching, so they didn't say

a word.

Echika confirmed the warrant with the police investigators in the room and began her preparations as always. First, she went from suspect to suspect, injecting them with sedatives. Then she plugged Brain Diving cords into their connection ports. Last, she jacked the Lifeline into her connector and handed it over to Harold.

“You remember the hint, yes, Investigator?” Harold asked.

“Yes, France. The Marianne stamp.”

“Good luck,” he said as he connected the cord into the port in his left ear. “Ready whenever you are.”

Echika took a deep breath and glanced at the suspects’ faces. They’d been forced into a deep slumber. Everything was in order, and the preparations were complete. *Take a deep breath.*

“...Begin.”

She slowly fluttered her eyelids shut before she felt her consciousness plunge into the sea of electrons. But the next moment, she felt a burning pain run from the back of her neck to the top of her head.

“—Ugh...”

A soundless scream escaped her lips—*What?* She could clearly hear the vivid sounds of sparks coming from her connection port. And then everything whited out.

For a moment, all sound and sensation vanished.

“—Investigator Hieda!”

When she came to, she found Harold staring down at her with a strained expression. Behind him, she could see the ceiling of the interrogation room. Her eyes met with the gloomy light of lamps—a ceiling? Echika sluggishly realized that she was lying on the floor.

What on earth had happened?

She could hear footsteps approach from somewhere. The police investigators who'd stepped out to another room to let them Brain Dive rushed back in. She made out a flurry of words being shouted into the air: "Hospital!" "Ambulance!"

As she sank into her slow, sluggish thoughts, she was overcome by an odd sense of déjà vu; she'd seen scenes just like this before. Where had that been...? Everywhere, really. She'd witnessed it time and time again until the day she met Harold.

Yes.

This was what had happened to the investigator aides she'd worked with when she'd fried their brains.

"The investigators called an ambulance." She just barely heard Harold say this. Everything felt fuzzy and vague, like she was bobbing up and down. "Echika." She thought she could feel his hand touch the port on the back of her neck. "Ah, there's a burn..."

But then her hearing cut out. Like she had been closed off inside a cocoon.



"Simply put, it's a basic case of decline in processing speed," a pudgy male doctor said calmly as he checked the results of Echika's inspection.

The examination room of Saint Petersburg's Union Care Center felt almost unnaturally pristine. The pipe chair Echika sat on rattled and trembled unsteadily beneath her weight. Or maybe she was the one who was shaking. She couldn't tell anymore.

What had he just said?

"Well, I say decline, but in your case, Miss Hieda, your numbers have gone down to the kind of average figures you'd find in most people," the doctor continued in a carefree tone. "I just got the results of your scan, but as far as the Your Forma can tell, there aren't any signs of strokes or abnormalities. Your brain waves are within the normal range. You lost consciousness because a temporary strain caused your brain to overheat—"

Echika had woken up in an ambulance after passing out while Diving. The emergency diagnosis AI said that she wasn't in any mortal danger, but the bureau had taken her to the hospital to be on the safe side. There, she underwent several cranial nerve scans. The results of her examination were now being read to her.

A basic case of decline in data processing speed.

Instances of electronic investigators developing these symptoms were few and far between. Much like having one's ego muddled, this was a by-product of an investigator breaking down. She'd seen her colleagues go through it a few times in the past.

But the same thing happening to her? She couldn't believe it. Yes, she'd felt a bit under the weather today, but...there was no way she could have expected this.

"Hmm..." Echika managed to force herself to speak. "Is there any chance it's a Your Forma malfunction or a virus...?"

"We put you through a full scan, but we didn't discover any issues with your unit. There's no physical damage, either. Well, you *did* develop a burn on the back of your neck, but that was from your connection port sparking," the doctor said, working a tablet. "I understand this might sound cold, but things like this happen every now and then."

Yes. I know that. But...

"What...?" Echika started to say, but her throat seized up, so she reworded the question. "Do you know what the cause might be?"

"The thinking is that it's essentially a consequence of interference from emotions like anxiety. Data processing speed is based on neural activity to begin with, so everyone experiences fluctuations in ability on a daily basis. But in cases like these, the degree of the fluctuations is so large that it's difficult to return to your original levels."

Echika couldn't bring herself to come up with a reply to that.

"In other words, you can think of data processing abilities as similar to your sense of sight. Anyone can experience small declines in their vision without

realizing it, when they overuse their eyes. With rest, you'll recover naturally. But with electronic investigators, on the other hand, your numbers go from being very high to declining into more typical figures..."

What the doctor said hadn't really sunken in. Yes, if something was causing this, it probably had to do with a change in her brain activity. But that must have been because the suspects had done something to her, right? Didn't they know someone would Brain Dive into them if they got arrested? They could have messed with their Your Forma somehow to stop her from gazing into their Mnemosynes—could have planted some kind of trick or trap that would damage an electronic investigator's brain when they tried to Brain Dive into them.

Couldn't this explain why her data processing abilities had declined?

"As hard as it may be for an electronic investigator to hear this, I need you to understand something." The doctor adjusted his glasses and looked up. "Changes to data processing speeds are irreversible. No matter how much they decline, treatment can't push them back up—"

She felt chills rush over her body.

"—so I think you should consider a change of profession."

Echika couldn't quite remember how she'd left the inspection room.

"If nothing else, I'm glad you're not severely hurt or ill, Hieda."

She was in the telephone booth on the first floor of the care center. The wooden chair was hard and uncomfortable to sit in. Across from Echika was Totoki's holo-model, wearing a somewhat pitying expression.

"Your abilities really were exceptional." Her kind tone irritated Echika. **"That's why the bureau and I relied on you so much... I suppose that placed more pressure on you than we realized."**

Echika clenched her teeth. Was Totoki really thinking the same as the doctor? That emotional strain had eroded her Brain Diving abilities?

"Chief," she said, forcing out her next words. "Please check the suspects' Your

Formas. Maybe they did something, planted some kind of trap. Something that lowered my data processing abilities—”

“Yes, I thought the same thing and had the analysis team look at that. The results are in already.”

“And what did they find?”

“There was no tampering, no traps,” Totoki said, shaking her head. *Lies.* **“We had electronic investigators Brain Dive into the suspects one by one to check after you were taken away. Their Dives were successful.”**

Echika felt everything go dark. *No. That can't be.*

“But, um... Maybe they overlooked something?”

“I considered that, too. But they did their jobs perfectly, so it seems the suspects are unrelated to this.” Totoki's expression softened. **“You've done well so far, Hieda. But you need to understand. Bad things can happen out of nowhere. Anyone would be confused at a time like this—”**

Indeed, if the suspects had nothing to do with her drop in functionality, the only remaining cause would seem to be emotional instability. *But...that can't be. It mustn't.* After all...

“But I know I'm not that weak,” Echika protested, trying her hardest to appear stoic. “My stress tolerance is much higher than average. That's part of why I was compatible as an electronic investigator—”

“But that doesn't mean you feel no stress whatsoever. You're still human.”

“Please, think back to the sensory crime. We couldn't detect anything about it, even after a full scan of the Your Forma. I'm sure there's a trick this time, and it's probably hidden in a similar way.”

“Unlike Taylor and Steve, those suspects don't have access to that kind of advanced technology,” Totoki admonished her, like a stern mother. **“Take some time off, Hieda. You've been working yourself to the bone lately anyway.”**

“But there are cases I'm still in charge of.”

“Of course. If you think working would help keep your mind off things, I'll

consider having you reassigned ASAP, but—”

—Reassigned.

In other words, Totoki wasn't going to put her in charge of cases that required Brain Diving. She was quick to switch gears; that was her job.

But wait. Just...wait.

“Chief, please.” Echika sat up, unable to stop herself. “Let me investigate the suspects again. I'll manage to Dive in this time. Just give me one more chance.”

“Hieda.”

Totoki called out to her sternly as her features returned to their usual stoniness. Echika felt something cold prickle in her heart. Gritting her teeth, she settled back into the chair.

With dignified eyes, Totoki repeated her implication: *You have to face reality.*

“Rest assured, the bureau isn't going to dismiss you.” Totoki's voice sounded distant. **“According to your occupational aptitude analysis, you currently have what it takes to be a police investigator. I know it's not your first choice, but... Either way, we're not going to kick you to the curb just because your abilities declined.”**

“...Thank you, Chief.”

“I want you to take the experience you gained as an electronic investigator and put it to use elsewhere. Except—”

If only the words she said next could have gone in one ear and out the other. Echika would have been so much better off.

She ended the call and stepped out of the telephone booth. The distant sound of classical music enveloped her body. Couches were set up every which way in the waiting room. Outpatient reception was closed, so there weren't any patients in sight, but a single Amicus rose from a sofa and approached her. She couldn't help but feel his appearance always drew her eye, no matter where they were.

“What did the Chief say? Did the suspects sabotage their Your Formas?” Harold asked, concerned.

Harold had been by her side the whole time, ever since she was carried off to the hospital. He'd waited for her tests and scans to be completed, even though it took hours. She felt indebted to him.

"Apparently, the suspects had nothing to do with it," Echika said, trying to keep her voice from shaking. "I guess it must have been because I'm in bad shape today. It, um... It's probably because I haven't been sleeping, what with the midnight sun."

"Yes, sleep is important for human health. But I think it's theoretically impossible for your data processing abilities to decrease that much from lack of rest alone."

She knew that. She knew she was just making excuses out of desperation.

"Um, we need to get you back home." Echika checked the time on her Your Forma's UI. It was eight PM. "I'm sorry. Daria must be worried sick about you."

"Not to worry. I contacted her and told her I would be home later because the investigation was dragging."

"...I see."

"I'll walk you home," Harold said with a comforting smile. "I went to the branch to get the Niva while they were examining you."

"Thanks. But I'll just take a taxi."

Echika rejected him and made for the exit. Harold went after her, of course. Given the differences in their strides, he'd catch up to her no matter how quickly she moved her legs.

"Investigator," the Amicus said, catching up to her. "Please rely on me, at least when you're feeling unwell."

"You've done enough for me already. Go back home, for Daria's sake."

"I can't just abandon my partner in a time of need."

Partner, he'd said.

Echika kept walking and left the building. The sky still glowed dimly, and the wind felt terribly heavy as it buffeted her cheeks. Cars passed by on the

roundabout, their taillights melting in red blots that looked somehow grotesque.

She stopped in her tracks.

“...Investigator?” Harold’s serene voice washed over her.

Echika licked her bottom lip. For some reason, she was brought back to when she’d resigned as an electronic investigator six months before. And now she could see just how much of a luxury it had been to make that choice willingly.

She’d never imagined the day would come when she would long to Brain Dive but be unable to do so. That was all she was good for.

“Aide Lucraft.”

“—I want you to take the experience you gained as an electronic investigator and put it to use elsewhere. Except—we still want Aide Lucraft to continue to serve as a Belay. So...”

“You are...,” Echika started to say. Despite the fact that it was summer, her throat had practically frozen over. “...Not my partner anymore.”

Harold gazed at her in silent shock. A taxi drove into the roundabout, its engine seeming awfully loud. The growl of its engine was like the sound of a beating heart being crushed, somehow. Maybe it was just her imagination.

Harold made an expression as if to part his fair lips.

“Either way.” Echika hung her head and cut him off. “I think the chief will contact you about the details soon. I’m sorry I troubled you today. Be careful on your way back home. Bye.”

She rattled on, her words coming out in a rapid-fire pace, then fled into the taxi parked next to her. Maybe Harold had tried to stop her; she couldn’t tell, since she was hanging her head the whole time. Regardless, she wanted to be left alone as soon as possible. Otherwise, he might even catch on about the secret, too.

I’m pathetic.

She’d forced herself to carry this burden, only to brood over it and eventually lose everything. The fact that she could never, for the life of her, become

shrewd enough for this made her fed up with herself.

Echika got a call from Harold on the way home, but she ignored it. As soon as she made it back to her apartment, she dived straight into bed without a second thought. She inserted one of Bigga's cartridges into the back of her neck a short while later. Before long, the rage bubbling inside her body gently subsided. And at the same time, the tears clinging to her eyelids stopped running.

She didn't think she had any dreams that night.

3

The next morning. It was past eight AM, and the sky was almost offensively bright.

<Today's top temperature: 28°C. Attire index D, a thin shirt, is recommended for daytime>

Checking the weather app on his wearable terminal, Harold got into the Lada Niva. The early summer sunshine shooting through the car's windshield strained his processing power. *I'm not a fan of this season*, he thought as he switched on the engine and set out from his residential apartment.

The memory of what had happened the night before suddenly replayed in his mind. He'd gotten a call from Totoki just after Echika left the roundabout.

"The doctor said that what drove Hieda to this state was emotional in nature, but...have you noticed any changes in her recently?"

Totoki's hair had looked quite disheveled on the holo-browser. Her expression was perfectly restrained, but it was clear she was quite rattled by this turn of events—no one held Echika's abilities in higher regard than she did. This reaction was to be expected.

Honestly, Harold hadn't seen this coming, either. He'd be lying if he said he wasn't shaken up by this, too.

"Nothing in particular comes to mind, but..."

"Are you sure? Anything, no matter how small, might help."

Once again, he thought back to the last few months. He couldn't quite recall any particular changes in Echika's behavior. The only thing that came to mind was that she'd mellowed out somewhat compared to before. Though that did strike him as a bit odd, they'd spent a considerable amount of time together by now, so he simply figured that she'd accepted him. Except...

Ever since the RF Model assault incident, he'd lost confidence in his ability to read into Echika's heart. Had that caused him to overlook something? Did she, perhaps, still regret having shot Marvin? Had the guilt been eating away at her all this time...? But Echika needed to do that to defend herself. He was sure she had rationalized it as such, too.

Or maybe—had she found out about his neuromimetic system?

That suspicion, which he had previously written off, once again reared its head. But he couldn't imagine Lexie talking about the system, and even if Echika had heard about it from Farman, she would have had no reason to believe him. Plus, she would have revealed the truth by now if she'd taken him at his word. Unlike with the Matoi, Echika had no reason to keep this secret to herself.

Try as he might to make sense of things, Harold couldn't wrap his head around it. Beyond that, he was afraid. What if his flimsy attempts at figuring her out wound up working against him, like before?

“Aide Lucraft?” Totoki's voice pulled Harold out of his thoughts. **“Did you remember anything?”**

“No... Nothing.”

“I see...” She let out a deep sigh. **“Well, things like this happen sometimes, so I'm not terribly surprised, but...”**

“Human data processing speed isn't like ours—it fluctuates all the time.” Harold had reviewed some articles on medical websites on the subject while Echika was being treated. “Once human electronic investigators' and investigator aides' processing speeds decrease, they never go back to what they were before.”

“Right. There's no medical treatment that can help improve your data processing abilities.”

Apparently, it wasn't strictly true that there was no way of treating this, but rather that the means of forcing human data processing speed to rise caused a great deal of strain on the patient's brain. It was possible to temporarily increase one's processing abilities, but those changes didn't last long, and the aftereffects had serious health ramifications. There had been a time when medical research was still being conducted in this area, but the practice had been outlawed in recent years.

"It's easy to forget this, but being an electronic investigator is a high-risk profession. Take how it can muddle your ego, for instance," Totoki continued, her voice altogether cold and emotionless. **"According to bureau policy, electronic investigators who lose their abilities are to be transferred to other departments based on their aptitude. And that's...probably what's going to happen with Hieda."**

Harold could only listen in disbelief. Echika being transferred away from her position as electronic investigator? His system processing lagged for a moment.

"What'll become of me, then?" he asked.

"We'll have you continue investigating the current case *alongside another electronic investigator*, of course."

Harold furrowed his brow ever so slightly. That was the first he'd heard of this—but if he had to continue pursuing the international electronic drug trafficking route without Echika, he didn't have much choice in the matter. The case would still need solving, personal problems or no.

"Don't worry. The new electronic investigator we're bringing in is very talented." Totoki refused to look at Harold, proving that she felt guilty on some level. **"She used to work under the Electrocime Investigations unit for HQ. Her processing speeds have been on the rise recently, so she's had to periodically change Belayers. Of course, she's not quite on Hieda's level, but... we can't afford to not put your processing speeds to use."**

"When will the new investigator get here?"

"She should arrive at the Saint Petersburg branch tomorrow. With Hieda out of commission, she'll probably become our new ace... Make sure to get along with her, would you?"

Harold finished replaying the memory. He could once again feel his hands on the grip of the steering wheel. He detected a strain on his systems. His numbers were quite high. He terminated a number of tasks causing interferences that were running in the background.

A new electronic investigator. Promising enough for Totoki to expect that much of her. But she wouldn't be on Echika's level, of course.

The branch building came into view through the windshield.

Harold entered the Electrocime Investigations Bureau office and was greeted by the usual hustle and bustle of the workday. Several dozen desks were lined up in the area, filled with clutter. His eyes naturally wandered to where Echika sat. She had never been one to decorate her workspace. Up until yesterday, it had been pretty drab and empty as desks went, housing nothing but her work PC peripherals.

But it looked different today. A trendy brand bag sat atop the desk, alongside a half-empty tumbler belonging to a famous coffee chain. She'd probably gotten it at the airport. The faint scent of perfume hung about the table—his new partner was young. She invested her money into fashion and probably got along well with her friends. She didn't smoke. And based on her brand of perfume, her personality was likely—

What's Echika doing right now?

That question suddenly filled his mind, only for him to immediately cut it off.

But his thought patterns kept calling up tasks about her. Memories of Echika opened in an attempt to predict her mental state. Brain Diving was practically a part of Echika's body, so this must have been tantamount to a crisis of identity for her. Just what had driven her to this state? And why hadn't he noticed it this whole time?

I should stop.

Yes, this was a question he would have to eventually resolve, but now wasn't the time.

An unfamiliar woman entered the office before long. Her facial features were what many humans might describe as “attractive.” She had dark-blond hair that bordered on brown, which spilled over her slender, shapely shoulders. The woman wore a blouse and tight skirt, from which extended her long, fair limbs.

Their eyes met. She regarded him with a friendly smile and walked over to him, her stride totally different from Echika’s.

“Chief Totoki told me about you. I’ve never met an Amicus more handsome than you,” she said.

This was his new partner.

“Nice to meet you.” Harold extended a hand toward her with a smile. “I’m Investigator Aide Harold Lucraft.”

“Electronic Investigator Liza Robin. A pleasure.” The woman—Liza—returned the handshake without a second thought.

Her fingernails were painted pink and well maintained. Normally, people’s hands felt warm to Harold, but today her palm came across as cold.

“I’ve heard what happened to your last partner. It sounds horrible.”

“Yes. It really is a pity.”

“The unfortunate part about this job is that you always have to keep the investigation going, no matter how rattled you get,” Liza said, furrowing her brow in pity.

She’s quite conscious of how she presents herself, down to the smallest of gestures, Harold thought.

“Let’s go. The suspects are waiting for us,” she said.

And she was right. They had to get started. Harold left the office with Liza, casually observing the woman as they headed toward the interrogation room. Her hair wavered with each step she took. Earrings of a reserved design hung from her ears.

“Do a lot of electronic investigators suffer from declines in data processing speeds?” he asked.

“I hear about it a few times a year. Brain Diving puts a strain on people’s brains and emotions, after all...” She turned her eyes his way. “But I was surprised when I heard that it happened to Investigator Hieda. I thought she was truly unparalleled.”

“You know Investigator Hieda?”

“I passed her in the hallway a few times in HQ. I’m pretty sure every electronic investigator knows about her,” Liza said, cocking her head. “Though... I guess she probably isn’t aware of me at all.”

“I heard you have great Brain Diving skills and are set to become one of our top electronic investigators.”

“Chief Totoki’s expecting too much out of me.”

Their exchange felt flighty somehow, and oddly hollow. The pair arrived at the investigation room to find it much the same as it had been the day before. Investigators from the Electronic Drug Criminal Investigations Department were already inside, and the suspects were lying on cots. Liza touched base with the investigator in charge of the room, then applied sedatives to the suspects one by one.

So this means...

“...You can handle parallel processing?” Harold asked.

“Yeah, I just acquired the ability. I’m not all that used to it yet, though.”

She took out the Brain Diving Cord and Lifeline, lifted her hair, and connected the cord to the port on the back of her neck. Harold felt his emotional engine produce an inexplicable sort of sensation, but he himself couldn’t quite decipher what it was.

Just when had all these emotions he couldn’t understand started surging up so frequently?

“Do most humans experience a continual rise in data processing abilities?” he asked Liza.

“There have been a few cases of it in the past, but it’s not common. I was surprised when it happened to me, too. I never knew I had the disposition for

it.”

“I suppose that would make you a genius?”

“You don’t have to force yourself. You’re allowed to be sad about your old partner,” Liza said, a comforting smile on her lips.

For a second, he struggled to process that statement. Harold still had perfect control over his expressions, so she must have been speaking out of sheer concern. But...did he look like he was despondent about this?

She then extended the connector of the Lifeline over to him, and as always, he shifted his left ear away and connected it to his port. Liza seemed initially surprised to see him do it, but soon smiled happily.

“You have your port hidden in a lovely place,” she remarked.

“Yes.” She didn’t find it unsettling, it seemed. “Does Diving with an Amicus unnerve you?”

“Not at all. I’ve loved you Amicus since I was a little girl. If anything, I’m honored.”

Thankfully, she was an Amicus sympathizer. “I’m very relieved to hear that, Investigator Robin.”

“You can call me Liza, Harold.”

It occurred to him that Echika hardly ever called him by his first name. But how long was he going to keep thinking about her?

“Very well, Liza.” The calmness in his voice struck even him as somehow strange. “I’m ready whenever you are.”

Liza nodded and closed her eyes. Her bold eye shadow shone sleekly. She didn’t say anything to start the process. This silence was her signal.

His partner began her descent a moment later, and Harold felt his system processing speed accelerate. The Mnemosynes flowed into him like heat through her, one by one. He had just Brain Dived with another electronic investigator, who wasn’t Echika. And of course he had. He’d Brain Dived with other electronic investigators during the period when she’d resigned, after all. So why was it bothering him now?

The speed of Liza's free fall was, to his astonishment, almost identical to Echika's. As the Mnemosynes flowed into his mind, he sorted them into tabs based on order of importance. He thoroughly browsed them individually for details. His processing speed was such that he could take his time and investigate each one without needing to rush.

As one could expect from people who'd gotten caught up in electronic drugs, their memories were all rather depressing. Dealings in night clubs. Smuggling contraband into flights. He saw the dacha—it looked like they'd hired programmers to mass-produce electronic drugs there.

The Mnemosynes didn't have any of these people's feelings attached to them. Reading them was like watching a film reel without any fluctuations, and he processed them indifferently. When something seemed important, he placed a tag on it, then discarded the rest.

But then, suddenly, noise crackled through the Mnemosynes. The footage cut off.

A counter-current.

He glanced at Liza. Her eyes were closed, and she wasn't stirring. Normally, counter-currents only developed when a Diver's and a Belayer's processing speeds matched. Echika had been hounded by counter-currents when she and Harold first started out.

Liza, however, wore a peaceful expression. She soon found her way out of the tunnel and continued throwing Mnemosynes his way. The suspects were obsessed with electronic drugs and money. As Harold inspected the Mnemosynes, he let his thoughts wander to other tasks.

Based on the counter-current that had just occurred, Liza's data processing abilities really must have been a match for Echika's. In other words, she, too, could serve as a shortcut for tracking down Sozon's killer.

Indeed.

Then *there's no problem*.

His objective was to find the culprit behind Sozon's murder. So long as he could achieve that goal, his partner was all the same to him, regardless of

whether that was Echika or another electronic investigator. His only misgiving was that he would need to rebuild his trust with Liza from scratch; but even that could end up proving convenient for him.

Echika had always been difficult to handle, after all. She had too many qualities he couldn't get a read on, and it left him at quite a loss.

Yet despite these thoughts, the strain on his system wasn't going down. Harold felt like he was incapable of thinking rationally. Had this shaken him up? *Shaken up?* Why would he be?

The city of Paris streamed past before long in the Mnemosynes. The suspects came in contact with a French man. This could be connected to the Marianne stamp. He committed the characteristics of the building they walked into to memory. It would be possible to infer the address from the landmarks in the vicinity.

This was more than enough. He reached for Liza's Brain Diving cord and pulled it out after waiting for the appropriate moment. She twitched, then fell sideways. It was so sudden he was almost too late to react. Harold reflexively caught Liza by the shoulders as she started to drop to the ground. Her eyelids twitched and then lifted. He was close enough to be able to see how long her eyelashes were.

"Liza?" If nothing else, Echika never stumbled like this. "Are you all right?"

"Yes... I'm sorry. This is how it always is." Liza smiled vaguely, still not trying to brush his hands away. "My doctor said the fainting spells are a side effect of my data processing abilities continually rising... I didn't bump into you, did I?"

"Not at all. How do you feel?"

"I'm fine. Nothing feels off."

"And the counter-current doesn't affect you, either, right?"

"Yes, that happens fairly often, too..."

Liza softly pushed Harold's hand away, then extended her hand to unplug the Lifeline from his own connection port as if there was nothing out of the ordinary about it. Just then, she snapped back to reality when she noticed he

was staring at her closely.

“Oh, gosh. I’m sorry, was that rude of me?”

It seemed Liza had a truly positive opinion of Amicus. This was good for him.

“I don’t mind,” Harold said, smiling so as to soothe her. “I suppose that one of my duties will be ensuring you don’t collapse from now on.”

“You can let me fall down if you want. Though I suppose that clashes with your Laws of Respect?”

The Laws of Respect: to always respect humans, obey their orders, and never attack a human being.

“Correct. It’s exceedingly difficult for me to see you fall down and do nothing to help.”

“How gentlemanly of you,” Liza said as she bundled up the cords. “Going back to the Brain Dive, I figured out that the suspects had an accomplice based in Paris. I suppose we’ll be going back to HQ, then.”

“Yes. You must feel quite busy, though. You just arrived in Saint Petersburg, and now you have to immediately fly back home to France.”

Liza’s hands froze. “...Did I ever tell you I was French?”

“Well, there’s your name, of course, but I could also tell from your facial features and intonation.” Harold slowly shifted his gaze, scanning over her. “Is the Amicus in your home a woman model? I imagine you take her on walks on your days off.”



Liza's eyes widened in surprise. Her pupils shrank slightly as she cracked a bashful smile.

"The chief told me about this, but I guess you really can discern all sorts of things just by looking at someone."

"Not everything, of course. Only things like this."

"Still, that's very impressive. How lovely!"

Nothing could be easier than getting someone to like you without putting in any effort. Right?

4

Arbat Street was Moscow's number one shopping district. Classical-style streetlamps lined the pedestrian mall, which was crowded with souvenir shops and fast food restaurants. Sitting in a chain restaurant terrace seat, Echika glanced out absentmindedly at the tourists passing by and the musicians and painters standing in the street. The petunia flowers planted around the premises had mostly wilted.

Sitting opposite of her were—

"Investigator Sedov, you can make a sorrel omelet at home. Why order one here?"

"My fitness app assistant AI told me to order it here this time."

"There we go again. Are you going to be a slave to the whims of your Your Forma day in and day out?"

"Speaking of food, Fokin, do you have any idea how many calories are in the pancakes you're eating—?"

"Hey, cut that out. Don't spoil my breakfast."

They were two Russian men chatting over inconsequential things. Both of them were police investigators affiliated with the Investigation Support Department of the Electrocime Investigations Bureau's Saint Petersburg branch. The Investigation Support Department mostly handled incidents that weren't yet at a stage that required the involvement of an electronic

investigator. Basically, they handled pretty much anything in the branch that needed doing when there weren't enough hands on deck. Members of other departments sometimes teasingly referred them as "the chore department."

In other words, these two men were Echika's new seniors at work.

"Are you sure that's enough for you, Investigator Hieda?" The slender Investigator Fokin asked as he cut into his pancakes with a knife.

<Ivan Lukich Fokin. 26 years old>

He was a young man with a cheerful complexion, and his wavy, dark-brown hair quite suited him. His personality was a far cry from the sternness one would expect from a police investigator.

"I'm fine," Echika said, pulling the nearby cup closer to her, the surface of the mass-produced cinnamon apple tea sloshing inside it. "I can't bring myself to have a leisurely meal while on stakeout, is all."

"If only you had half of her seriousness," said the other investigator, a big-boned man named Sedov. He was older than his partner, and he always had stubble on his chin. "Think back to your rookie days sometimes, Fokin."

"Like you're one to talk, with how you're wolfing down those omelets."

"I trust in my fitness app. It knows me better than anyone."

"But here's what E would say about that: 'The fitness app and this café's management are actually in cahoots,'" Fokin said as he brought another forkful of pancake to his lips. "If all the chain restaurants bribed the managers of the fitness app, they could be using it to advertise their stores as health conscious to draw in customers. They'd all profit from it."

"I considered that, but that's not even a conspiracy theory. These aren't nonprofit organizations we're talking about, so it makes sense they'd cooperate."

"But E's believers don't care about that. They'll latch on to any plausible reason to vent their frustrations on something, and that's as good an excuse as any."

"Well, I guess some people are just more naturally prone to getting scammed

than others,” Sedov said as he swallowed some of his omelet. “So...when are these believers supposed to show up?”

That’s right—the purpose of this stakeout was to make contact with E’s followers.

Echika had gotten another holo-call from Totoki the night before.

“Hieda. We had our meeting, and we’re deciding to appoint you to the Investigation Support Department.” Totoki had concisely relayed the results of the special general meeting to her, then added, **“As a matter of fact, they’re currently throwing everything they’ve got at trying to hunt down E.”**

Echika thought back to yesterday’s emergency meeting on the sensory crime, and of how E had leaked classified information on an anonymous message board.

[Elias Taylor, the suspect of the sensory crime incident, used the Your Forma to manipulate people’s thoughts. The Electrocrime Investigations Bureau is aware of this fact and is hiding it.]

“Every branch’s Investigation Support Department has been on the lookout for E even before this, but now that the bureau has been marked as a target, they’re being pressed to produce results ASAP. It’s only a matter of time until E’s believers start another ‘game.’ We need to unmask E and arrest them as soon as possible.”

It was perfectly plausible to imagine that the believers might try to harm the Electrocrime Investigations Bureau. But thankfully, they hadn’t made any notable movements yet. E’s followers often discussed on their message boards how to tackle the “powerful enemy” that was the bureau, but they hadn’t done any actual damage yet. At worst, a few amateurs had tried cracking the bureau’s servers, only to be brushed off by information security.

Still, the fact that E held the truth about the sensory crime in their hands meant the bureau couldn’t treat them with kid gloves.

“Has the Investigation Support Department been informed about the thought manipulation program?” Echika asked.

“No, we have a tacit understanding that they won’t ask about it. I’d expect most of their investigators don’t believe in E’s claims, though. Like I told you last time, mum’s the word on the details of the sensory crime.”

Echika wasn’t very happy about getting assigned to a different department, but since she was involved in the sensory crime incident, this was an important case for her. Plus, physically speaking, she was faring much better. She was relieved she hadn’t been ordered to take time off.

She turned her thoughts back to reality and placed the cup she was holding on its saucer. “Investigator, do you really think E’s followers are going to show up in this restaurant?” she asked.

“Without a doubt,” Fokin said, looking through a document on his Your Forma. “This chain has five branch stores in Moscow. Yesterday, E’s believers showed up in each of them, one after the other, except for this one. So if they’re going to gather somewhere, this place should be next.”

The believers could be easily identified from their distinct appearances: They all wore or carried something with the letter *E* on it. Many of them had the letter tattooed somewhere on their bodies. This was their way of expressing their faith in E, a sign of their loyalty and pride.

“So we’re supposed to make contact with the followers. And then what?” Echika asked a question she was honestly apprehensive about. “The believers are just foot soldiers. They don’t know E’s true identity. If we’re going to solve this case, we’ll have to track E down.”

Fokin and Sedov exchanged glances, their expressions mixed. Fokin was the first to speak.

“Since the Web Surveillance Department can’t track down where E is posting from, there isn’t much the Investigation Support Department can do. The only thing we can do right now is catch E’s followers and squeeze useful hints out of them if we’re lucky.”

“And has doing that moved the interrogation forward in any significant way

so far?" Echika asked.

"Do you really wanna hear the answer to that?" Sedov retorted. "If you've got a better idea, we're all ears."

Unable to come up with anything, Echika could only fall silent. The fact of the matter was that tracing E in the real world was impossible if they couldn't figure anything out about the anonymous posts. It would have been easy to track them down if they made their uploads from a Your Forma, but E instead used terminals or bot viruses to hack other computers and make their uploads.

And on top of that, the believers were also in the dark about E's identity. Echika found herself appreciating just how sly their opponent was once again.

"Besides," Fokin said, swinging a fork, "how do they manage to post such accurate information? You can't really call them conspiracy theories if they're always right."

"That's 'cause they're crackers," Sedov replied. "They can steal any information in the world."

"So you think E's employer is some anti-technology advocate?"

"We already investigated that line of thought and couldn't come up with any leads."

"Maybe we're not looking into the right people, then. Maybe E isn't even a cracker."

Echika watched Fokin and Sedov debate as she tipped the cup to her lips again. She felt totally out of place sharing a meal with these two. It felt like there was a lump in her throat.

Two days had passed since she'd parted ways with Harold on the roundabout. She never did return the phone call she'd ignored that night. A sense of confusion and fear she couldn't quite understand took away any desire she might have had to call him back. After all, what would she even say to him?

Stop this pointless ruminating. Concentrate.

About an hour later, the believers they were waiting for appeared, two young male twenty-somethings wearing caps with the letter *E* embroidered on it. The

pair crossed the patio to enter the restaurant. They both looked quite unassuming and were dressed like typical sports fans.

Sedov got to his feet. “Hieda, you stay on standby. Contact us if any other followers come in.”

“Understood,” Echika said.

“On your feet, Fokin. How long are you going to stuff your cheeks?”

“Ah, dammit, I’m only halfway through my pancakes...”

“Yeah, because you ordered *another serving*. Also, I’ve been meaning to tell you this, but you’re definitely gonna get fat one of these days.”

Sedov and Fokin walked away from the table, chattering. Echika blankly watched them walk away from her seat. They entered the store and called out to the believers. She doubted this method would land them any hints, but she didn’t have any better ideas.

As that thought crossed her mind, she scanned her eyes vaguely over the patio. Then she noticed a patron sitting in a seat by the corner, a very slender boy who looked to be in his late teens. He was dressed in a worn-out shirt, and his arms looked very pale. The boy seemed to be alone.

As far as Echika could remember, he’d been sitting there since they’d taken their seats. An untouched cup of coffee sat on his table. He was moving his hands restlessly about his neck.

His neck?

Something Harold had once told her flashed in Echika’s mind.

“People touch their necks when they’re trying to calm their nerves.”

Maybe he was talking to his friends through his Your Forma and was in the middle of an argument. Or perhaps he was nervous about something he had planned later that day. There were plenty of plausible explanations.

But it weighed on her mind. What was up with the way the boy’s eyes seemed to be flitting nervously around the store? After thinking it over, Echika rose to her feet. She needed to trust her gut at times like these.

“Excuse me,” she called out to him.

The boy’s shoulders jolted. He looked at her with tense eyes—and the pop-up window that should have deployed in her field of vision to display his personal data didn’t open.

A luddite who didn’t have a Your Forma. Luddites lived in technologically restricted zones, and they largely didn’t interact with Your Forma users. There were occasions when they left their home regions for areas without technological restrictions, but based on this this young man’s attitude, Echika couldn’t write off the possibility of him being up to no good.

“I’m from the Electrocime Investigations Bureau.” Echika held up her ID card. “Can I see some identification—?”

The boy instantly reached for his cup. Echika didn’t have time to dodge. He splashed the coffee in her face! Thankfully, it was already cold, but the fluid got in her eyes, and she staggered back a few steps.

What am I doing?!

She forced her eyelids open just as the boy bolted into the store. Gripped in his hands was a small folding knife he’d produced from somewhere. He was heading for the worker behind the counter.

“Investigator!”

She called out almost instinctively. Fokin was the first to react. He stopped the young man, twisting up his arm with a flowing motion. The boy dropped the knife as Fokin forced him down to the floor. The other patrons screamed out in shock and surprise. The followers the two of them were questioning froze.

That was close.

Sedov swiftly cuffed the young man. Echika breathed out in relief and let the tension drain from her body. Just then, she grew terribly aware of how hard her left breast was thumping. She exhaled from her diaphragm, wiping the coffee dripping down her face with her palm as she did so. It felt incredibly sticky.

This is the worst.

Talk about a good omen to kick off her new position.

The entirety of Arbat Street descended into uproar in a matter of minutes. Police cars drove into the pedestrian mall, and security Amicus affiliated with the local police began pulling holo-tape over the entrance to the restaurant. The patrons were escorted out of the store to be questioned by police investigators who'd hurried to the scene. There were reporters sniffing around, too; they'd somehow gotten wind of this already.

Echika watched the scene from afar as she opened a plastic bottle full of mineral water. She'd bought it at a nearby store to wash her face for the time being. Surrendering herself to her gloomy mood, she flipped the bottle over her head and let it pour over her.

"Hey, hey, hey. A bit too exciting around here, don't you think?"

She wiped the water droplets dripping from her eyelashes and looked up. Investigator Fokin approached her with an exasperated expression. Behind him, she could see the two believers and the young man being forced into a police car.

"Are the two followers unrelated?" Echika asked, wiping her face with her sleeve. Her hair was still wet, but the sun was out, so she wouldn't catch a cold. "Or were they in cahoots with the boy?"

"Probably not, but we'll be taking them into questioning anyway. The kid's an E follower, too."

What? "I thought he was just a civilian... Did you confirm it?"

"Yeah. He has an *E* tattooed on his ankle."

Investigator Sedov was conversing with the local police on the restaurant's terrace. Security Amicus were standing next to them, awaiting orders. Seeing their perfectly serene expressions made her heart churn. They kept reminding her of Harold's soft smile.

"...That boy was a luddite," Echika said as calmly as she could. "He shouldn't be able to go online. How would he know about E?"

"He hasn't talked yet, but it's clear that E has some way of conveying

instructions to luddites that the bureau doesn't know about yet."

That realization may not have been the clue they'd wanted, but it was progress—more progress than they'd made so far.

"Is he Russian?" Echika asked.

"No. As far as we've checked from the passport he had on him, he flew in from Oslo, in Norway." At that point, Fokin cast a significant glance at her. "But...Investigator Hieda, why did you suspect him?"

Echika was stumped for an answer. The man regarded her with pure curiosity in his round eyes. Once upon a time, Harold had asked her the same question.

She still couldn't believe it—that she couldn't go back to being an electronic investigator. But more than anything, she couldn't believe how much that Amicus had influenced her.

"It was...just a hunch."

"Your former electronic investigator's intuition?" Fokin's question stabbed her in the heart. He knew, of course, that she'd been working under the Electrocrime Investigations Bureau until just two days ago. "I can't imagine what Diving into someone's head is like, but you've experienced a lot of people's emotions, right?"

"...Yes, um..."

"So I guess you could tell what he was thinking just by looking at his face."

"That could be." Echika licked the inside of her lip. She felt extremely uncomfortable. "I'll head back to the branch first. It looks like this'll take Investigator Sedov a while..."

Either way, she wanted out of this conversation. Just as she passed Fokin, he gently grabbed her by the arm. She turned to face him with surprise.

"Sorry," he said, his expression suddenly turning very apologetic. "Looks like I said something to offend you."

Huh?

Echika couldn't immediately process what he was saying; in her mind, being a

“genius electronic investigator” made her a natural subject of curiosity and aversion. She simply took it for granted that people would treat her with sarcasm and disdain. For that reason, she didn’t want or expect him to apologize. And yet...

“I’ve heard the rumors,” he said, letting go of Echika’s arm. “Sounds like being a ‘genius’ caused you a great deal of pain.”

“No.” Was he pitying her? “Why...?”

“I mean, it’s not like I’m in danger of you frying my brain, am I?” Fokin cocked his head jokingly. “Listen, the people in Investigation Support, we’re not the most serious folks, for better or for worse. So you can take it easy around us.”

He added that he wouldn’t mention Brain Diving again and headed off toward the restaurant, where Investigator Sedov was. Echika stood frozen in place. She didn’t quite understand what that had been about, but it seemed like Fokin had caught onto how she felt.

But what for? It couldn’t be that he’d done that for no reason...right?

She gently crumpled the plastic bottle in her hands. It was only now that she realized what she’d lost along with her ability to Brain Dive.

So this is it.

This is what being normal is like.

5

“Where did you learn about E? Does he have a community of believers among the luddites, too?”

The Saint Petersburg branch’s interrogation room. From the other side of the one-way mirror, Echika could see the luddite boy they’d arrested in the restaurant a short while ago sitting opposite Sedov. The boy was gripping his knees under the table, the handcuffs glittering around his emaciated wrists.

“Based on his passport, he’s eighteen years old,” Fokin said, standing next to Echika. He was wobbling on a pipe chair that squeaked each time he moved. “Straight out of high school, apparently.”

Echika nodded. “Where is he employed?”

“Let’s pray he feels like telling us.”

As Fokin said that, they both glanced at the one-way mirror again.

“I won’t tell you anything,” the boy said brusquely. “All I did was do the right thing.”

“Attacking an innocent employee at a restaurant was the right thing to do?” Sedov asked, not changing his expression.

“You’re all wrongdoers. E knows everything,” the boy replied.

“What makes you think that? Maybe E’s incorrect.”

“E can’t be wrong. They’re right—the Your Forma really did ruin everything,” the boy said. He had bags under his eyes. “You might not know it, but that cursed brain thread has made it so none of us luddites can find any work.”

Echika and Fokin exchanged glances. So this was his motive.

“I see,” Sedov said calmly. “But you can always accept employment support.”

“That’s a program run by filthy ‘Thread Brains,’ and it uses AI,” he said, using a derogatory term for Your Forma users. “You say that having the Your Forma inserted into you is a choice and that everyone is free to refuse. And I believed that and spent my high school years as a luddite. But once I started job-seeking, look at where it landed me.”

“I can relate to your troubles, friend, really, I can. But that’s not an excuse for assaulting people.”

“I’m not saying it’s an excuse. I’m just talking.”

“You live in Oslo, which is, if I recall correctly, a coexistence region,” Sedov said, leafing through some documents. “If you live in a city full of Your Forma users, it’s inevitable there would be fewer jobs for a luddite. Why not move to another town, then?”

“You’re saying this is my fault?”

A coexistence region. Simply put, they were cities where Your Forma users and luddites shared the same spaces. Norway had a high percentage of

technologically limited zones compared to the rest of the world. Out of respect for their luddite population, the Norwegian government had designated its capital, Oslo, as a coexistence region where the two populations could overlap. Despite that, it was still difficult for luddites to find work in a city full of drones and Amicus.

“So that’s his story,” Fokin said, scratching his cheek. “That’s a pretty common background for a believer.”

“You’ve questioned E’s followers before?” Echika asked.

“Quite a few. The people who end up idolizing E are dyed-in-the-wool anti-technology advocates and anti-establishment types for the most part, but young people with problems finding work or issues in life also stand out among them.”

The interrogation continued. The boy hung his head and kept repeating the same things over and over, as if to convince himself of them.

“I’ll prove E is right. I have more than enough comrades out there...”

“Oh, I’d love for you to introduce us to those comrades of yours.”

“I have nothing else to say.” The boy glared faintly at Sedov. “You can’t Brain Dive into me. So long as I stay quiet, your hands are tied, right? Eat shit.”

Curses left his chapped lips.

“...I believe in E. This world will become a better place.”

Following that, the boy clammed up and refused to speak anymore. It didn’t matter whether Sedov asked him gently, threw him leading questions, or subtly threatened him—the boy refused to talk.

This is as much as we’ll get out of him.

“Since Oslo’s a coexistence region, luddites can come in contact with Your Forma users there. If that’s how the suspect learned about E...” Echika brought a hand to her chin. “He said he has ‘comrades,’ so we can probably assume there’s a large-scale community there.”

“We need to look into it, of course, except...” Fokin sighed. “I’m afraid we don’t even have a branch there. We can only hope the Oslo police aren’t too

slow to act.”

“Indeed.” But as she nodded, she came up with an idea. “But, yes... I think I might have a lead besides the local police.”

In all likelihood, *she* would be knowledgeable about this field. It was worth trying to ask for her help.

Echika left the interrogation room and made for the fifth floor, where the Electrocrime Investigations Bureau office was located. She passed some familiar faces, but no one said anything to her. In fact, they all looked oddly distant. She headed to the branch chief’s office to ask for a permit to enlist the aid of a civilian cooperator.

Echika wanted to return to the Investigation Support Department as quickly as possible. But as she passed the office with that thought in mind, she stiffened in place.

At the end of the corridor, she spotted a familiar Amicus. A customized model with lustrous blond hair and features like a work of art. Harold was speaking with an unfamiliar woman, and it appeared the two were quite intimate. Echika could tell she was a very pretty woman, even from afar. She had a slender figure, like a purebred cat, and she looked dignified enough that Echika wouldn’t be surprised if she saw her on the banner of a fashion site. She couldn’t recall seeing the woman in the branch before, but maybe she’d been dispatched from HQ.

The two of them looked perfect together. This woman wasn’t her replacement electronic investigator, was she? Echika couldn’t stand to look at them. Just then, however, Harold finished his exchange with the woman and parted ways with her. He turned in Echika’s direction, and his gaze met hers.

Harold’s eyes widened with surprise.

Drat.

Echika turned her back to him, like she was running away. She wasn’t confident she could talk to him right now. She hurried away, sprinting toward

the elevator hall. Thankfully, an elevator had just gotten there, so she quickly got in.

“Excuse me.”

Of all the things that could have happened, Harold slid inside before the doors had time to close.

Don't chase me! Echika nearly verbalized her thoughts but managed to choke back her words. *Maybe he just has business on a lower level. Calm down. You're panicking too much.*

When the elevator doors completely shut, a silence so heavy that Echika almost choked descended upon them. She couldn't look him in the eye. The elevator began moving sluggishly.

“This is novel,” Harold said, his tone somehow distant. “Coffee perfume?”

She must have still smelled of coffee. “...I had a bit of an accident. Sorry, but you'll have to put up with it.”

Echika squeezed into a corner of the elevator and hugged her arms around her. Harold was staring at her, no question about it. She withered under his piercing gaze, breaking into a sweat. She felt like she had to say something.

“Why are you ignoring my calls?”

Echika dug her fingers into her arms. Her emotions sizzled abruptly, only to fizzle out before she could put them into words. And yet it seemed this reaction was more than enough of an answer for him. Harold exhaled lightly from his nose. This was just an act, of course, since he didn't need to breathe.

“I thought I understood just how intense this shock was for you, and that's why I was worried. But you wouldn't pick up.”

“I just...needed some alone time. I...” Echika bit the back of her lips. She couldn't bring herself to admit that she felt pathetic. “I, um...I thought you'd be able to read into my heart. Like you always do.”

She said something she didn't really mean in an attempt to disguise the fact that she was afraid of being mocked for her weakness.

“As I've told you before, my predictions about you often miss the mark,”

Harold replied indifferently.

“So you’re saying you’ve stopped observing me?”

“Either way, I don’t need to do it anymore.”

“...I’m sorry I ignored you. If you’re upset about that...”

“I’m not upset. As per the Laws of Respect, I will always respect you.”

The Laws of Respect. Echika looked up unintentionally at the sound of those words and instantly regretted it. Harold was standing closer to her than she’d imagined, his cold gaze fixed on her. His eyes, like frozen lakes, were more perfectly sculpted than she remembered.

Echika had shouldered the weight of Harold’s secret out of an earnest desire not to lose him. But was there any point to keeping it now that she was no longer his partner?

In the end...maybe what she’d wanted to protect all along wasn’t even him? She felt like she’d just discovered something in her heart—something filthy she’d been dreading all this time.

“Um,” she started, feeling like she would drop dead on the spot if she didn’t say anything. “Well... Are you getting along with your new investigator?”

“Yes, thankfully.”

“Was it that lady from earlier?”

“Yes. Investigator Liza Robin.”

“I see... She’s so pretty. It’s almost a waste that she’s an electronic investigator.”

“I concur.”

“I’m doing well in the Investigation Support Department, too.” She felt like she was choking. Like she was going to throw up. “Everyone’s very kind. It’s surprising, really.”

“That’s good to hear.” Harold narrowed his eyes. “Liza and I are going to France tomorrow.”

The elevator started slowing down as it reached the second floor. The door

slowly opened, but Echika remained where she was.

“France? Are you going to HQ in Lyon?”

“Yes. We’re still affiliated with this branch, but we’ll be acting out of Lyon for a while.”

“What about Daria?”

“She said she’s fine with me being away. For a little while, at least.”

“Right... But why tell me this?”

“Indeed.” Harold looked away from her and cocked his head curiously. “I suppose I have no reason to report this to you anymore.”

“That’s right.”

What is he trying to do?

Suddenly, a surge of something she couldn’t quite understand—a wave of sadness similar to irritation—built up in her. But she knew this emotion was misguided. She shoved it down.

“So, um... Good luck with work. Bye.”

Echika left the elevator this time. There were innumerable things she should have told him, but her mind was a mess, and she couldn’t put her thoughts in order. So she tried to leave.

“Investigator Hieda.” Harold called for her to stop.

Echika turned around awkwardly.

“...I’m not an electronic investigator anymore.”

“Echika, then.”

“Officer Hieda,” she corrected him coldly. “How many times do I have to tell you not to call me by my first name?”

“I don’t recall doing that very often, actually.”

“Do you want me to push you up along with the elevator?” Echika asked irately.

“You said you wanted to be equals this spring, right?” His eyes were fixed on

her, his gaze accusatory. “So why didn’t you tell me that something was troubling you enough to make your abilities as an electronic investigator decline?”

Echika clenched her fingers. So this was what he was angry about. And he was right; she was the one who had demanded that they be equals, so his frustration was justified. She did feel remorseful.

But that didn’t mean she could share the truth with him.

And she shouldn’t have been troubled by this to begin with. Echika controlled her guilt and anxiety with the cartridges. True, she had trouble sleeping at nights because of the midnight sun, but she otherwise wasn’t having any health issues to speak of.

Too much of this didn’t feel right to her. Or maybe she just didn’t want to admit that she was that fragile of a person.

“Nothing’s troubling me,” Echika lied. “Really, I...I don’t know how this happened to me, either.”

“Why do you keep trying to hide things from me?” Harold asked.

“I’m not hiding anything from you.”

“Echika.”

“I just told you to call me Officer Hieda!” she snapped at him, her sharp voice echoing through the elevator hall. Thankfully, there wasn’t anyone around, but this was as much as she could take. The thoughts she’d spent the whole day suppressing finally burst and overflowed like a muddy stream.

“This is...my fault for not explaining things properly to you. I’m sorry for being insincere. But really, nothing’s troubling me. But even if—” She realized she was about to say something completely unnecessary. “Even if I’m not your partner, it shouldn’t get in the way of you getting what you want. Investigator Robin is talented, right? Then she’ll help you achieve your goal just fine. You can find Sozon’s killer if you work with her...”

“Who told you that?”

Echika fell silent. She’d let her tongue slip. But this wasn’t something she was

actively trying to hide, either. She just hadn't found the right time to tell Harold what she knew.

"I did tell you about Sozon," Harold's eyes lost all their warmth and went glassy. They were cold, clear, hard eyes that would never melt again. "But I never said anything about me working as your Aide in hopes of finding his killer."

In other words, Harold had wanted to keep this from her. Was it because he was afraid Echika might interpret this as him "using" her? If so, that was all the more reason to clarify things.

"I heard about it from Daria over six months ago." The most she could do was lay it out to him at this point. "So I could tell what you said on the roof of the hospital—that you might understand why I make you so ill at ease if we work together—was pretense."

"It wasn't pretense."

"Either way, the justification you gave wasn't that important."

What was he thinking right now? Amicus were adept at controlling their emotions, so she couldn't read his expression. Regardless, this was as much as she could take.

"I'm sorry for causing you so much trouble," Echika prattled on, overcome by dread. "And I'm, um, I'm grateful for everything you've done so far. I really hope you can solve Sozon's case. Bye."

This time, she turned around quickly and left the place in a jog. Her heart was pounding so hard it threatened to burst out of her chest.

"I really hope you can solve Sozon's case?" How could I have told him that?

After all, he might end up taking a human life when that happened. But she couldn't stop him. Right, she couldn't do anything in the first place; the only thing she had done was choose to hide his secret, like a child who couldn't let go. If she'd done that for anyone, it was for herself.

Echika thought she had matured, even if it wasn't by much. But had she actually changed since the day she refused to let go of Matoi? Were those

feelings she harbored for him just another ugly sort of “attachment”?

“But...you’re the first person I’ve ever wanted to understand.”

At this point, even she didn’t know anymore. She couldn’t even believe herself.

Harold didn’t bother going after her.

YOUR FORMA

Chapter 2

Intersecting Nights



Chapter 2

Intersecting Nights

1

“Hiya, Bigga! Dad asked me to deliver these new cartridges!”

No sooner had Bigga opened the door than Hansa called out to her. She hurriedly brought an index finger to her lips, prompting the boy to cover his mouth with a hand. She turned around and glanced at her house, but thankfully, her father didn’t show himself.

“Dad came home yesterday. He can’t find out about this.”

“Sorry.” Hansa was two years younger than she was, and he wasn’t the sharpest tool in the shed. “You’re sending these to a friend, right? I’m surprised you didn’t learn your lesson after what happened with Clara.”

“Tell your father I paid for these fair and square,” Bigga told him.

“No, like, I’m not speaking for Dad. I’m personally worried for you...”

Bigga took the paper bag containing the medical HSB cartridges from his nervous grip. *I need to package these and send them to Echika in a bit.* Just as that thought crossed her mind, she glanced at Hansa and did a double take. There was a blue cloth coiled around his neck.

“Don’t tell me you went through the ritual?”

“Ah, yeah, just yesterday.” He proudly touched the cloth on his neck. “They said I shouldn’t take it off for a week. This marks me as a true bio-hacker.”

“...I see.”

Bigga bit her lips. She hadn’t completed it herself. Hansa was a family friend who lived in her neighborhood, and they’d known each other since they were little. Bigga saw him as a younger brother. She’d been sure she would go

through the ritual first when they both set out on the path to becoming bio-hackers.

“Congratulations, Hansa.”

“You should make yourself official, too, Bigga. Then we’ll both work together, like our dads do.”

Bigga nodded vaguely and parted ways with Hansa. She closed the door and then sighed.

Become a full-fledged bio-hacker...?

She stashed the paper bag in her room and returned to the kitchen, where two people were sitting around the table. One was her father, Danel, who’d returned from the mountains the other day, and the other was her cousin, Clara Lie. They were having a fruit soup dinner, which was what they usually ate when Bigga’s father came home.

“Ed and his group said they’ll look after the flock, but they had second thoughts about it because there are so many deer flies this year.”

“Isn’t there some way of keeping the flies from hatching?” Lie asked.

“They lay their eggs during winter, so there’s not much we can do,” Bigga’s father replied while carrying a spoonful of soup to his mouth. His chin was covered in red dots; maybe he’d shaved recently. His long chestnut-colored hair, much like Bigga’s own, was tied in a ponytail behind his head. *I’ll need to help cut his hair soon*, she thought.

Today marked ten years since her mother had passed away. Her father was getting along in years and had lost the spark of youth. As Bigga settled into her chair, Lie looked her way. “Who was at the door, Bigga?”

“Hansa. He returned a book I lent him,” she lied casually. “Dad, are you going to stay around for a while?”

“No, I’ll be heading out tomorrow. I need to give one of my clients a house call.”

“Huh?” Bigga frowned. “But I was thinking we could go fishing together...”

“What, going with me isn’t good enough for you?” Lie asked, hurt.

“They just snatch your bait and swim away, Clara.”

“I’m getting much better at it. Just a while ago I couldn’t even get a bite.”

While Bigga and Lie bantered, Danel started checking a tablet on the table. He used it to manage his bio-hacking jobs. In the past, he’d been just barely able to provide for his family through reindeer farming. But the vocation had gradually gone from a full-fledged career to a side gig, and with robots taking all the work, he’d needed to resort to working as a “back-alley doctor.”

As far as Bigga was concerned, however, her father had been a bio-hacker for as long as she could remember, so it didn’t truly feel real. She glanced out the window, where the sun overlooked the desolate townscape, having given up on setting any more that day.

“Say, Dad, can I help you with this house call?” she asked.

“You stay home, Bigga,” her father said, his eyes still fixed on the terminal. “You can only rest during the summer, you know. Come autumn, Grandma Sesse’s going to need your help to make Duodji.”

“Are they going to sell them in Oslo during Christmas?” Lie asked.

“It’d be nice if the tourists would come this way, but we can’t expect them to do that.”

At one time—that was to say, before the Your Forma became commonplace—Kautokeino had filled with sightseers every July. But tourist traffic had greatly declined ever since areas with luddite populations were designated as technologically limited zones, costing the area a significant portion of its income.

Bigga stopped eating. She didn’t mind watching the house or making Duodji, of course, but...

“...Hansa went through the ritual,” she said.

“Really.”

“I wish I could become a full-time bio-hacker and help support the family, too.”

Those were her honest feelings, but for some reason, putting them into words

pained her heart.

“I’m glad you feel that way, Bigga. But you need to think and reflect on your actions for now,” her father said, narrowing his green eyes, so similar to hers. “It’s only been six months since what happened to Clara.”

Bigga clenched her fists. Her father had been treating her this way ever since she’d implanted the muscle control chips in Lie. She could understand that he was trying to parent her and teach her to reflect on what she’d done.

But every now and then, she suspected that maybe there was more to it than just that. Perhaps her father knew she was cooperating with the Electrocrime Investigations Bureau.

She realized she was probably overthinking things. Having too much time on her hands made needless thoughts cross her mind. She really did want to become an official bio-hacker, that much was true. But she didn’t think that taking this kind of illegal work was the right way to live. And yet you sometimes had to turn a blind eye to things if you wanted to get by. She understood that.

Her mother would likely say the same.

Bigga gazed into her fruit soup. In the light wavering on its surface, she could see her deceased mother’s visage.



<Today’s temperature is 20°C. Attire index D, a long-sleeved shirt, is advised>

The Flytoget high-speed train moved from the Oslo Gardermoen Airport into the city. The cars were fairly crowded, and a view divided between the blue sky and cultivated land sailed through the polished windows. Echika leaned her cheek against her hand as she stared at the rut tracks carved into the soil by tractors.

A night had passed since she’d run into Harold at the Saint Petersburg branch. She’d been able to get by without any significant dips in her mental state, thanks to Bigga’s cartridges. It was ironic; she’d started using them to evade his observation skills, but now she was using them for this.

Was Harold on his way to France already?

Stop it.

She needed to remain focused on the E case for now. If the testimony of the believers they arrested in the Moscow restaurant was to be believed, E was expanding their support among the luddites, too. E's conspiracy theories had always taken a negative view of technology to begin with. It came as no surprise E's ideals would permeate among the luddites, since both parties' ideologies matched—the question was how E was spreading their influence.

If E's followers were forming their own community, they would need to track it down. Echika opened the investigation documents on her Your Forma.

"Fokin, my fitness app is telling me that Norwegian salmon and reindeer are pretty good."

"Investigator Sedov, are you sure that AI is trying to improve your well-being?"

"It takes care of my mental health, too."

"It's all in how you word it, huh? Me, I'm looking to sink my teeth into some waffles. Does your app recommend any good places?"

"Do you care about *anything* besides sweets?"

She could hear their carefree banter from the seats on the other side of the passage. Fokin aside, this was apparently Sedov's first visit to Norway. Still, they weren't tourists—they were there for an investigation.

"Please keep your wits about you," Echika said, frustrated. "Have E's followers made any moves?"

"Nope," Fokin replied readily. "Today's an odd-numbered day, so E isn't uploading anything, and their followers' message boards seem peaceful enough. The French posters especially; they're just talking about fireworks."

Fireworks. Come to think of it, Bastille Day was coming up. Every year, France held military parades, concerts, and fireworks displays across the country to celebrate the occasion. Lyon, where she used to live, had gotten just as caught up in the festivities as anywhere else in France.

“I guess they don’t just talk about conspiracy theories,” Echika remarked.

“Forget that.” Fokin leaned in. “Investigator Hieda, what are you planning on eating?”

Don’t drag me into this.

“I’ve got some nutrient jelly with me, so I’ll be fine without buying any food.”

“That stuff can’t possibly be filling, come on.”

“What kind of jelly? There’s sweet jelly, right?” Sedov piped in. “This café should be right up your alley. It’s gaining popularity recently, because their dishes are really careful with how much sugar they put in—”

Echika reclined into her seat, exhausted. They couldn’t get to their destination fast enough.

Oslo, the capital of Norway, was the largest city in the country, located deep in the Oslo-Fjord inlet. Despite its high population, the hills and mountains in its vicinity granted the city a pastoral look. Oslo Central Station was full of people dragging suitcases along. The walls of the station flickered with the familiar sight of MR ads. Echika’s Your Forma soon called up commentary.

<Oslo was home to renowned painter Edvard Munch. Every December, its city hall serves as the site of the Nobel Peace Prize award ceremony>—

Echika quickly switched off the friendly voice.

“So, Hieda, is that civilian cooperator of yours here yet?” Fokin asked.

“We’re already late for the time we agreed on, so she should be.”

She descended the stairs down to the city square with Fokin and Sedov. A large group of tourists was gathered around a large statue of a tiger, and Echika spotted a small girl staring at it from afar. Her chestnut-colored hair was tied into braids, and she wore a demure one-piece dress. In her small hands, she clutched a heavy-looking suitcase made of leather.

“Bigga,” Echika called out to her, to which the girl looked up in response...and then narrowed her eyes suspiciously.

She'd probably noticed Fokin and Sedov were accompanying her.

"Miss Hieda, um..."

"These are Investigators Fokin and Sedov. They're in charge of the case this time."

Echika hadn't told Bigga about her decline in Brain Diving ability, so the girl would've had no way of knowing that Echika and Harold were no longer partners. But either way, as a civilian cooperator, it was only a matter of time until she would find out Echika wasn't part of the Electrocrime Investigations Bureau anymore. She ought to have told Bigga sooner, but she hadn't been able to bring herself to do it.

"Um... I'm Bigga. Nice to meet you." Still looking bewildered, she shook hands with Fokin and Sedov.

"If you don't mind me cutting to the chase," Sedov said, "we'd like to know what information you have about E."

"I've got nothing." Bigga stared at Echika, seeming a bit annoyed. "I didn't know they existed until Ms. Hieda told me about them. But I come to Oslo a few times a year, so I'm familiar with spots where luddites come in contact with Your Forma users."

This was why Echika had asked for Bigga's cooperation with this case—Oslo was a coexistence region, but it was segregated into areas occupied by luddites and Your Forma users, respectively. Residential areas, workplaces, schools, and even the stores they frequented were clearly delineated between the two groups.

Some within the international community had voiced concerns about the human rights implications of this arrangement, but the Norway government adamantly claimed that it was a "means of rectifying the differences in the two groups' lifestyles." As such, the two populations of this city only ever saw each other on public transportation.

There were, however, a few "coexistence stores" that went against those rules by accepting both luddite and Your Forma customers without any segregation.

“Most coexistence stores are privately owned restaurants,” Bigga said. “Like cafés or bars... They’re run by people who see the segregation not as distinction but as discrimination.”

“What about the local police?” Echika asked. “Don’t they try to regulate these places?”

“From what I hear, they’re either unaware of those businesses or just leave them be. I don’t know too much about it, but it’s apparently quite the sensitive topic on an international level. Anyways, these coexistence stores should give luddites a chance to learn about E through Your Forma users.”

“Would E’s believers be able to form into a community there?”

“Probably.”

“Incidentally,” Sedov said, scratching the back of his neck. “I’m asking just to be on the safe side, but you’re not an E believer yourself, are you?”

“No,” Bigga huffed. “I just told you, I only learned about them recently.”

“Sorry about that. Being suspicious is one of his flaws,” Fokin said, flashing Sedov a critical glance. “Could you tell us where the coexistence stores you know about are located, Bigga?”

“Of course, but...what about places I’m not familiar with?”

“We’ll ask the managers of the stores we visit for more places.”

He took out a tablet and handed it to Bigga. On it was a map of the city of Oslo. Bigga zoomed in on the map and started marking it with swift movements.

“Um, the city’s pretty clearly split into an east and a west side. The west is the Your Forma users’ residential sector, and the east is where the luddites live... And since there’s quite a few stores around, checking them all will be hard.”

“Indeed.” Fokin nodded. “We should probably split up to cover more ground.”

After talking it over, they decided to split up into two groups. Sedov and Fokin would check the coexistence stores on the west side, while Echika and Bigga would check the ones in the east. Bigga was actually supposed to go with Sedov at first, but she’d been opposed to the idea, so they changed pairings.

Echika and Bigga parted ways with the two men and left the station square together.

“I’m sorry for making a fuss,” Bigga said, puffing up her cheeks in a pout. “But that Sedov guy seems like he’s very prejudiced against luddites.”

“You think?” Echika didn’t get that impression from him, but if Bigga said so, maybe she was right. “Well, it might sound wrong coming from me, but most investigators are a little impolite.”

“He reminds me of the way you acted when we first met.” *Huh?* “Also, I’ve been meaning to ask you something...”

Bigga looked up at Echika anxiously with clear eyes.

“...Why aren’t you with Harold?”

I can’t hold this off any longer.

Echika explained what had happened from start to finish. As she spoke, Bigga’s expression gradually turned to one of pity. Echika wasn’t sure if her own face looked pitiful in its own right.

By the time she finished her brief story, Echika and Bigga had reached an intersection. The poster of an indie band that couldn’t invest in an MR ad was plastered over an old-styled telephone pole.

“...I guess the cartridges weren’t enough to help with your trauma, Miss Hieda,” Bigga said, her face clouding over.

Echika couldn’t share the secret with her. So in the end, she’d had no choice but to tell her that the traumatic symptoms from the kidnapping had gotten worse. Bigga believed it easily enough.

The traffic light turned green, and the two of them crossed the road. Light from the midday sun bounced off the tram tracks. According to the Your Forma holo-marker, they’d need to walk a while longer to get to the eastern residential district.

“How did Harold take it, Miss Hieda?” Bigga asked.

“Huh?” Echika felt her throat seize up reflexively. “I’m not sure what... What do you mean, how?”

“Was he worried? Was he surprised?” Bigga bounced one of her hands impatiently. “I mean, he was your partner, right? You’ve always worked together.”

“Well, not always. We’ve only been working together for six months.”

“You don’t have to nitpick.” Echika didn’t think this was nitpicking. “Besides, if you’re here, and you’re not an electronic investigator anymore, then what’s Harold up to?”

It was an obvious question, but Echika wasn’t happy to have to go into details about that, too. She went on to tell Bigga about his new partner, Electronic Investigator Liza Robin, and—as Echika somewhat suspected she would—Bigga paled the moment Echika described her as a “pretty electronic investigator.”

“Wh-what?! And you’re just sitting on your hands while this is going on?!”

“Hmm, I’m not exactly sitting on my hands here. I’m working—”

“This is bad. I can’t beat someone like that!” Bigga cradled her head as if in crisis. She dropped her suitcase, which hit the pavement with a thud. “I’m short, I don’t have much of a figure, and... Why, why do handsome men have to attract pretty women? Who set the rules up like that? It’s messed up!”

“Bigga, calm down,” Echika wearily attempted to soothe her.

“I can’t calm down! That weird pretty lady might be toying with Harold as we speak!”

“No one said she’s doing anything like that. They’re just colleagues.”

“That’s what rubs me the wrong way about you, Miss Hieda!” Bigga grabbed Echika firmly by the shoulders and shook her.

The other pedestrians were throwing exasperated glares at them as they walked by.

What’s your problem?!

“Now listen up and stop playing dumb!” Bigga said, quite loudly. “Don’t think I haven’t noticed, Miss Hieda! I know you like Harold a lot!”

“Stop it, I’m getting dizzy...”

“But I’m fine with you! I mean, you’ve got, like, no charm!” *Excuse you?* “But a pretty woman here? I can’t stand that! Oh, gosh, I’m getting a bad feeling already. What are we going to do, Miss Hieda? Wait, you look sick! Are you all right?!”

“Yeah, I wonder who’s at fault for that...”

Bigga finally let go of Echika, freeing her from her grasp. Echika’s head was still spinning, though.

I wouldn’t have told her about this if I knew she’d get this worked up about it...

“Oh, hmm, I’m sorry... I kind of went out of control for a second there...”

“I’ll say...,” Echika said, cradling her forehead with a hand. “That said, I knew you liked Harold, but I didn’t think you had it that bad for him.”

“W-well, umm!” Bigga seemed to remember to go bashful. She fidgeted, her cheeks turning rosy. “I mean, I don’t *like* him, I just...admire him, and...”

“What do you like about him? His face?”

“Miss Hieda, could you please pick your words a bit more carefully?!” *Sorry.* “I mean, he’s very attractive in the looks department, yes, but he’s also a gentleman. And he’s smart, and good at reasoning, and... Wh-why are you looking at me like that?!”

“Oh, nothing.”

Bigga didn’t know Harold’s true nature—his mechanical nature, his capacity to use other people like pawns if it suited his goals. She’d been totally duped by his surface-level behavior. But this was Harold’s secret to keep, so it wasn’t Echika’s place to warn Bigga about this...

Still, Echika knew that Harold had a conscience, different though it was. This was why she’d allowed him to worm his way into her heart so easily. He’d understood the part of Echika that had longed to hold onto Matoi and had given her the push she needed to go forward despite that. He was the first person to ever treat her that way.

And yet...the fact that she’d allowed him to take root in her heart was probably more evidence of her weakness.

“How do you feel about this, Miss Hieda?” Bigga’s eyebrows had started to droop at some point. “If you could go back to being an electronic investigator... would you want to work with Harold again?”

If her Brain Diving skills recovered. The possibility of that was so slim it was past the realm of wishful thinking.

“Well...” Echika licked her lips. “Loss in data processing abilities is irreversible.”

“But if you could fix it?”

For a moment, Echika thought she’d heard Bigga incorrectly. “Huh?”

“I’m sorry. I wasn’t sure if I should say this, but...” Bigga glanced around warily and then continued in a hushed tone of voice. “There’s bio-hacking technology that can tweak data processing abilities. I don’t know much about it right now, but I could look into it...”

Echika found herself cracking a bitter smile. She could tell Bigga was trying to cheer her up, and it wasn’t very surprising that bio-hackers, who were considered back-alley doctors, had the technology to do that. But still.

“That’d be illegal. I mean, even the cartridges you’re sending me are sketchy.”

“They’re counterfeit, yes, but they’re effectively the same as what any medical institution would prescribe. That’s not illegal!” But then Bigga paused in realization. “No... I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have said that... You’re a police investigator, so you can’t do that.”

The tram rushed past them, sliding along the tracks and casting the thick, wavering shadow of its pantograph over the ground.

I’m not half as decent a person as Bigga thinks I am.

Echika was keeping secrets from her even now. It felt as though her lungs had decayed from her insincerity with each breath she took.

“...I appreciate your concern, really. Thank you,” she said.

“Don’t be,” Bigga replied, looking guilty. “I figured that if I got along with you better than before...that if I could help you, it would put me closer to Harold. But right now, I...”

“I know.”

“That was out of line. Forget I said it.”

True, Echika had grown closer to Bigga than before, and she was glad that she had. But it was the medical HSB cartridges that had brought them together—in other words, her attempts to keep up her lie.

I'm not worthy of her concern.

“Actually.” Bigga averted her gaze. “I...I'm not a real bio-hacker, not officially. So getting cartridges is probably the most I can do for you.”

Apparently, she was still “studying” to become a bio-hacker. Her father, who had also taken up the trade, let her handle simple tasks he could handle on his own, but she was still inexperienced with handling technology. She could do things like implanting muscle control chips or Your Forma suppressants, since those were basic operations that only required simple injections. But she completely lacked the experience required to produce complex gadgets, mix medicine, or perform surgery on patients.

This didn't come as much of a surprise to Echika. Given Bigga's age, no one would expect her to be a qualified professional. But when Echika told her that, Bigga grew conflicted.

“There are kids younger than me that are already certified.”

“Really?”

“Yes. So I really have to try my hardest, but...Dad has stopped teaching me lately.”

“How come?”

“Because of what happened with Lie.” She ran her eyes aimlessly across the streets. “I think you already know this, but I gave her the muscle control chips she was using...”

Clara Lie. That name was almost like a pleasant memory to Echika by now. Lie was Bigga's cousin and one of the victims of the sensory crime incident. She'd been a promising student at the Saint Petersburg ballet academy at the time. But as it turned out, she'd been augmenting her dance abilities through bio-

hacking, specifically with muscle control chips that had been implanted in her body. As such, she'd voluntarily retired from the academy.

From what Echika had heard, Lie's parents had disinherited her over what she had done, so she was currently living with Bigga's family.

"The truth is, I implanted the chips into Lie without consulting anyone." Bigga's voice was so feeble it was almost inaudible over the noise of the streets. "Like I said before, I messed up. I shouldn't have done it, no matter how hard Lie begged me to. Dad scolded me for it, too."

"Because you acted at your own discretion?"

"Yes. And Lie isn't the kind of girl to do shady things like that in the first place." Her smile was as awkward as it was fragile. "But look at me now. I just proposed the same thing to you. I made you a reckless promise that I could fix your data processing abilities... Really, why am I so stupid?"

A wind so dry its caress almost stung the skin toyed with Bigga's hair. Light flickered and danced over her hairpin.

"Even when I try to help someone, in the end, this is the only thing I know how to do."

Echika felt like she'd just caught a glimpse of the emotions hidden beneath those innocent eyes of hers.

2

Oslo's eastern luddite residential district was packed with colorful buildings nestled snugly together. Many of the people passing by were apparently immigrants from outside the country. Despite it being in the middle of this, there were no personal data or MR ad pop-ups, which made Echika feel a bit out of place. Despite that, there were still delivery drones prowling around, which only served to make the district look more mismatched.

Echika and Bigga went around to every coexistence store they could find, questioning managers at restaurants and cafés. After going through ten businesses, the two of them were utterly exhausted.

"Not a single hint," Echika said languidly. "I mean, I guess it wouldn't come

that easy...”

Each and every one of the business owners had given them the same answer: They’d never seen any patrons spreading E’s posts. Most of them had never even heard of E before.

“What if we don’t find anything?” Bigga asked, just as exhausted. “Plus, how can we tell if they do know about E, and they’re just lying to us? You can’t Brain Dive them, and we don’t have Harold around...”

“True.” Echika keenly realized just how useful his observation skills could be at times like these. “I sent Investigator Fokin a message. Maybe they had better luck.”

“Right. Let’s check out the next spot...”

They dragged their tired feet to a coffee shop in the Grønland district of Oslo, where they got useful information for the first time.

“There’s this bar near the Akerselva River, where they always hold these weird gatherings,” the shopkeeper, a Norwegian man, said as he peered curiously at Echika’s brandished ID card. “They invited me to join them, but I turned them down. They mentioned something about an anti-technology movement and healing sickness...”

“Was the person who invited you to join a Your Forma user?”

“Beats me. I didn’t exactly check to see if he had a connection port.” Then he gestured at his chest. “There were a few of them, and they all had shirts with the letter *E* written on it. They’re always hanging around there, calling out to passersby.”

Echika and Bigga exchanged glances—it seemed like they’d just hit the jackpot.

“The bar should open right around now,” Bigga said, checking the map on the tablet Fokin had left with her. “Do you want to check that gathering? It’s not far from here.”

“That’s the idea, of course.”

As it turned out, the bar in question was on the other side of the Akerselva

River in a small shopping district. It occupied the entire first floor of a building painted a reddish brown. The store lacked a sign hanging out front, and on top of that, the Your Forma's map didn't display any information about it, either. A red nightlight set by the entrance flickered on and off feebly.

Contrary to what the café owner had told them, they didn't spot anyone trying to lure pedestrians inside. However...

"There's definitely people going in," Bigga said.

"And I don't think it could be any clearer that they're E followers," Echika said, nodding.

From a distance, they could see young people wearing caps and T-shirts emblazoned with the letter *E* entering the bar. As far as Echika could tell, they were a mix of luddites and Your Forma users. It was almost entirely safe to assume this was the believer community they were looking for. As it turned out, walking around the entire day had paid off.

"Has Investigator Fokin called?"

"Not yet, but I'll reach out to him. Bigga, you keep an eye on the bar."

Echika turned her back to her and called Fokin. The callback tone beeped incessantly in her ears—he wasn't really busy stuffing his cheeks with Norwegian cuisine and waffles, was he? But just as that irritated thought crossed her mind, he finally picked up.

"Enjoying your waffles, Investigator Fokin?" she asked sarcastically.

"Don't remind me of waffles. The only thing I've got my hands on is a shopkeeper who loves to talk," Fokin said rapidly. **"I saw your message. We just got some new info. There's a bar near Akerselva that's supposed to be a gathering place for believers—"**

"We just so happen to be right outside it."

"Seriously?" he sighed. **"You beat us to the punch."**

"Anyway, let's link up. I'll be waiting with Bigga, so—"

Echika turned around as she said this, only to pause in shock. Bigga, who'd been standing there just a minute ago, was gone. Except she wasn't completely

out of sight—Echika saw her boldly heading into the bar. A few followers threw suspicious glances at her as she passed them by on the way in.

What is she doing?!

“Investigator Hieda?” Fokin asked her, alarmed. **“What’s wrong?”**

“Nothing too serious, but Bigga just walked into the bar all on her own.”

“What?!”

“Sorry, I need to go after her. Let’s rendezvous later.”

Fokin seemed to want to say something else, but Echika quickly hung up. What in the world had caused Bigga to act so rashly? They had no idea what kind of people were in there, so charging in alone was insane.

Echika hurried to the bar, not bothering to mask her apprehension. She pushed through the front door, and the moment she stepped inside, the scent of alcohol stung her nostrils. Intense purple illumination burned into her eyes. The interior of the bar and the counter were jam-packed with followers. The venue was more spacious than it looked from the outside, not to mention deeper. The walls were covered in illustrations that looked like street art and large screens, albeit older flat-screen types instead of modern flexible ones.

For a second, Echika stiffened in place. Those screens were all showing E’s posts. Countless conspiracy theories flowed across the monitors as pop music played. Before long, the words “The hottest unresolved games!” appeared on the monitors.

And then,

[Elias Taylor, the suspect of the sensory crime incident, used the Your Forma to manipulate people’s—]

The believers started booing the moment the post appeared. Someone loudly cussed out the Electrocime Investigations Bureau, which was followed by a barrage of clapping and whistling.

Echika grimaced—this place was warped. She needed to find Bigga and get out of here, fast. But the girl was nowhere to be found. Echika pushed her way past the followers, heading deeper into the bar. Thankfully, there were some Asian people here, so she didn't stand out too much.

The believers' conversations washed over her like waves.

"Man, E really is amazing." "More reliable than the government, that's for sure." "I'll follow E forever." "Have you heard? They say E's true identity is some multi-billionaire philanthropist." "Is that why they can prepare so many types of medicine?" "They say E has ESP." "Are their apostles coming today?" "They're in the back, I saw them earlier."

Apostles? What are they talking about?

Her Your Forma was pestering her with notifications from Fokin, but she ignored them. That would have to wait for now. Echika found Bigga in a circular part of the pub full of table seats. Wires stretched overhead, around which coiled artificial flowers modeled after southern plants. It looked appallingly cheap, but the believers didn't seem to mind as they drank and chatted.

Bigga was peering into a small room in the back through a window set against the wall.

"What are you doing, Bigga? We need to get out—," Echika said as she peered into the space above her head.

The first thing she saw was a misshapen sunflower drawn on the wall. The room was rather bare, save for a leather sofa and a low table. Three men dressed in black were sitting on the sofa opposite an older mother and her child. The latter two were apparently believers, as they had E tattoos on their arms. The pair gazed at the men with intoxicated eyes. Echika could barely make out their conversation.

"Oh, thank you so much, great apostles! My mother's doing much better thanks to your medicine."

"The Your Forma users release electronic waves that cause dizziness," one of the men replied. "But E is always on your side. If you have any problems, come to us for help."

So these are the “apostles” the believers mentioned...

Unlike the followers, they weren't wearing anything that marked them as affiliated with E. It seemed like they offered something akin to spiritual and mental support of sorts to the believers, but... Were they basically E missionaries? That would mean E was regarded in a religious sense, and their activities were akin to a cult's.

“I think we're going to want to talk to these men,” Echika whispered. “They might be connected with E.”

Hearing this, Bigga finally parted her lips. “They shouldn't be connected to E.”

“What makes you say that?”

“Because...” Her eyes were fixed on the window. “That's... *That man is my father.*”

It took Echika's thoughts a moment to fully process what she'd just said.

...What?

“I saw my dad walk in here earlier, so I couldn't help but go after him,” Bigga said quietly, her voice shaking. “I thought maybe I mistook someone else for him, but... Why? What is he doing here...?”

Echika examined the three men again, and on closer inspection, the man sitting on the right did have chestnut-colored hair, and the shape of his nose was exactly like Bigga's. His slender, muscular physique contrasted with his short stature. Were the other two just luddites? Why would he do this?

“Either way,” Echika said, placing a hand on Bigga's shoulder. “We need to get out of here and wait for Investigator Fokin. We'll be in danger if they find out who—”

But Bigga wasn't listening to her.

“What are you doing, Dad?!”

Ignoring Echika's warnings, she bolted into the room. The mother and child, who were on their way out, stared at her in surprise. No, not just them—the other followers sitting nearby all turned their eyes on her.

This is bad.

“Bigga? What are you doing here—?”

The rightmost man on the sofa, Bigga’s father, made to get up. The other two apostles exchanged amazed glances.

“You said you were going to pay one of your clients a house call! What are you doing here?!” Bigga drew closer to her father. “Are you an E follower, too?!”

“How did you find out about this place?” her father asked.

“I’m asking the questions here, Dad! Answer me!”

“Hey, Danel,” one of the men called out to Bigga’s father. “This is bad news, she’s that—”

Their eyes turned to Echika at once and widened in fear.

Wait. They know who I am?

But they didn’t give her time to react.

“She’s an investigator from the Electrocime Investigations Bureau!” one of the men suddenly called out. “Catch that woman!”

God damn it.

Echika turned around and realized it was too late. The believers seated at the tables sprang to their feet, glaring at her with eyes that seemed possessed. Echika reflexively pulled down a nearby table, sending a man who was trying to rush her tumbling to the ground. A woman appeared from another direction and grabbed her arm. Then someone rammed into her. A dull pain ran through Echika’s head as her feet tangled.

I have to hold on...!

Echika couldn’t shake off the believers as they jostled her around and forced her to the floor. She tried to draw the gun holstered at her leg but couldn’t reach it. She was pressed facedown against the ground. Someone reached out from somewhere and grabbed her by the nape of her neck. She felt them tear off the gauze on the back of her neck covering the burn she’d received a few

days ago.

“She’s got two ports!”

“An electronic investigator!”

“You demon...!”

Hearing them rain curses on her, Echika shuddered.

They’re going to kill me!

But just as she felt all the blood drain from her face in terror...

“Nobody move!” She heard a shout fill the bar. “Put your hands behind your head!”

For a moment, complete silence settled over the place. Echika somehow managed to crane her head and saw Fokin and Sedov standing in the entrance of the courtyard. She sighed in relief—they had made it in time.

But this feeling was short-lived. The believers let out roars that shattered the silence before they decided to stand up to Fokin and Sedov, of all things. A few gunshots shook the air, rattling Echika’s eardrums. A siren coldly blared out in the distance behind the two investigators; it must have been from the local police.

Having somehow freed herself in the midst of the chaos, Echika crawled over to the small room and glanced inside. Bigga’s father and the other two men were gone—the door leading to the back entrance was open and swinging in the wind.

God damn it! They got away!

*

“Dad, let go of me! Let go!”

Bigga was helpless as her father picked her up, carried her, and forced her into the back seat of a station wagon. He tossed her suitcase on the floor of the back seat, and it landed with a thud at her feet. The wagon then came to life, with the other two men from earlier sitting in its front and back seats respectively.

“Go,” Danel said as he sat next to her.

The car sped away. Bigga glanced out the window, pressing her forehead against the windowpane, watching as the bar grew smaller and smaller in the distance. She considered forcing the door open, but it was too dangerous.

The moment she’d last seen Echika crossed her mind. She’d been surrounded by believers.

Oh, please be safe...!

As that wish filled her thoughts, Bigga felt all her pent-up fury erupt. She had no idea how things had turned out this way.

“Bigga, what were you doing here?” her father asked her. “Were you helping that electronic investigator?”

That’s what I need to find out.

“Why do you know about Miss Hieda?” she asked him back. “Dad, don’t tell me you knew all—”

“Danel, we have to split up!” the man in the driver’s seat called out. “I’ll leave the car with you, and we’ll go back to Murmansk. Got it?”

“Yeah, got it. We need to shake off those police investigators somehow...”

Bigga was confused. She looked between her father and the driver. Neither of the two men were familiar, and they weren’t Sami. Were these luddites he’d met somewhere? But if that was the case, then why?

He must have known she was a civilian cooperator. They even knew what Echika looked like.

“Dad.”

“Bigga,” her father’s hand rested on her shoulder soothingly. “Listen to me. I’m not going to blame you for this. You must have your reasons. It’s all that electronic investigator’s fault; she took advantage of you.”

Bigga managed to shake her head. Everything was happening too fast, and she couldn’t keep up with it.

“Is the bureau going after E?”

“Dad, wait.”

“It must have been that upload. They panicked because E got it right.” Her father wasn’t listening to her. “They can try to stop it all they want, but the truth will prevail. It always does. E will save us for sure. So don’t worry.”

“I don’t know,” Bigga said in between gasps. She really didn’t. “Are you an E follower? Are you cooperating with them? Why?”

Danel turned his eyes to her. They looked slightly bloodshot, and his pupils were dilated. His features were familiar, but at that moment, her father looked like a complete stranger.

“...I’m sorry I kept it a secret from you,” he said, his voice awfully stiff. “But this is like a protest. E can expose the truth. He’ll bring the darkness of the Your Forma to light. And if our voices get louder, it might make people rethink the way things are now.” Danel tightened his grip on her shoulder. “If all goes well... we’ll be able to make a living without having to work as bio-hackers.”

What is he saying?

Bigga felt bottomless despair and fear well up inside her. This was a pipe dream; it couldn’t possibly work out this way. She wasn’t going to claim she was all that familiar with how the world worked, but even she could tell that. This lifestyle had been forced onto them by a terrible, complicated set of circumstances that couldn’t easily be unraveled and reversed. No matter how big of an outrage E whipped up, a conspiracy or a violent uprising wasn’t going to change anything.

But evidently her father didn’t feel the same way.

“The day where we’ll be able to cast away this contradiction is coming, Bigga,” Danel carried on. “We won’t have to dirty our hands with this filthy bio-hacking technology. We’ll be able to live quietly as luddites, like before, just herding reindeer—”

“Do you seriously believe that?” Bigga asked aggressively.

She shook off Danel’s hand. She could tell the two men in the front had turned to looked at them, but she didn’t care.

“I’m begging you, Dad, snap out of this.” She was afraid. It felt like the father she loved and respected was being overwritten by this fanatic stranger. “E is just a conspiracy theorist. They don’t have the power to change society! So why are you doing this?!”

“You might not understand this yet, but—,” Danel started.

“I’ll never understand it! Please, let’s just go back to the bar and explain the situation to Miss Hieda!”

“Calm down, Bigga!”

Her father pulled his arms back from her and glared directly into her eyes, the same way as when he used to scold her back when she was little. And each time he did so, Bigga would always reflect on her actions, no matter how minor they were.

But this time...

“—I’m doing this for your sake, too.”

...she couldn’t understand for the life of her what this attempt at persuading her even meant.

*

Several police cars had parked in front of the bar. Amid the tumult of the bustling shopping district, the local police loaded the arrested followers into vehicles. The bright blue glow of the police lights glinted over the place, blotting out all other colors.

“We’ll leave you to handle this place, Investigator Sedov. We’ll go after Bigga.”

“We’ll link up again later, Fokin.”

“Right.” Fokin tapped Sedov on the shoulder. “Hieda, you come with me.”

The man walked off, his jacket flapping behind him, and Echika followed. Her body was still aching everywhere from being jostled by the believers earlier, but now wasn’t the time to complain.

“Investigator Fokin, Bigga is a luddite. We can’t detect her GPS position,”

Echika said, walking beside him. She'd cut her lip at some point, and even talking filled her mouth with the taste of blood. "How are we going to track her whereabouts?"

"Does she still have the tablet I gave her?"

"I think so." Bigga's trunk hadn't been left on the scene. Her father and his companions must have taken it with them. "So we can just track the tablet's position?"

"I'll phone the Investigation Support Department chief and make the request. You go to the parking lot and get a car for us."

"Roger that."

She parted ways with Fokin and relied on the map to find the parking lot. She picked a shared car—a German SUV—and got inside, then used her Your Forma to log in with her user credentials. When she finished the procedure, the motor came to life and the car began rumbling.

Echika placed her hands on the steering wheel. She was concerned about Bigga, but still, it was her father who'd abducted her. She doubted he would hurt his own daughter, but...

It turned out that Danel was one of those apostles, or whatever they were called. Were those three connected with E? She'd find out once they arrested them. They couldn't afford to let them get away.

A short while later, Fokin opened the door to the driver's seat and gestured for Echika to move over to the passenger's seat. She did so, and he got inside impatiently.

"We have Bigga's position." Echika's Your Forma received map data from him, which she opened at once. "It's moving along the E6 at 120 kilometers per hour. Based on their route, we can assume they're headed for the airport."

"How did luddites get through a share car's verification?"

"This is a coexistence region. They have their own share cars." That made sense. "This whole place ended up working against us."

Fokin started driving. Echika looked at Bigga's position on the map; the E6

road extended north and led to the Oslo Gardermoen Airport. Were they planning to escape via airplane? Even if the luddites tried that, she and Fokin would just need to beat them to the punch and get to Kautokeino first.

“Here.” Fokin suddenly held out something—a handkerchief.

Echika furrowed her brow. She didn’t immediately understand what he meant by this.

“Wipe off your mouth,” Fokin said, sounding annoyed. “Are you just gonna let it bleed?”

“Oh...” She touched her cut lip. “Don’t worry, I’m fine. The bleeding will stop soon.”

“...I was thinking this when you had your coffee, but you’re one indifferent person, aren’t you?”

Echika felt her breath catch in her throat.

“Which makes me think that you’re something of an indifferent person, aren’t you, Investigator?”

It reminded her of an Amicus who’d said the same thing when they’d first met. Her memories erupted, like someone had set fire to their fuse. The way he’d been terribly worried when Farman kidnapped her. His reaction the other day, when she’d failed to Brain Dive...

But by now, she was starting to understand, one way or another. She glanced between Fokin’s face and the handkerchief he held out for her.

There are probably kind people everywhere, if you look.

But the world she lived in before had been far too small and narrow for her to notice that until now.

“...Thank you.” She accepted the handkerchief. “I’ll wash it and give it back.”

“You don’t have to. Throw it away.”

“But it’s clean...”

“I can’t tell if you’re indifferent or very sincere,” Fokin said teasingly. “You’re lucky you got away with just a cut on the lip. I don’t like seeing my colleagues’

dead bodies, no matter the reason.”

“...Yes. Thank you.”

She pressed the handkerchief to her lips, and her nose was greeted by the scent of a detergent she didn't recognize. Yes, there were kind people everywhere if you looked. A colleague she could trust was right before her eyes. Fokin and Sedov weren't bad people. They could be a bit irresponsible at their job sometimes, but they were decent senior colleagues.

The reason she'd accepted Harold at the time—that she'd ended up clinging to him the way she did—was because she'd been extremely lonely. She was starved for kindness and affection. But now that she had let herself enter an environment that accepted her, she would be fine—even if she never Brain Dived again. Even if she never saw Harold again. She could be fine without him.

Echika had just found someone who would be kind to her, so she shouldn't have had a reason to be obsessed with that Amicus. Yet why did everything seem so empty in his absence?

Echika bit her cut lip under the handkerchief. Was this different from what had happened with Matoi? Was she misreading her emotions? Was what she felt toward Harold attachment? Or was it something else entirely...?

All Echika knew for sure was that this wasn't just a sense of responsibility for sharing in his secret. But if that was the case, then why did it feel like she was being crushed under the weight of those emotions? Why had she lost her Brain Diving abilities over this?

They were a short distance from the airport when it happened: The GPS data of the tablet they'd been tracking disappeared into nowhere. Someone had turned it off intentionally.

“Guess they noticed it,” Fokin said, clicking his tongue. “There's a fork in the road ahead. They might have made it look like they were going to the airport to throw us off their scent before changing course to Sweden. Are they thinking of flying in from there?”

“I doubt it.” Echika called up a list of nearby airports with her Your Forma. “Even if they go to Sweden, the closest airport is only for internal flights.

Wouldn't they just go to Oslo International Airport if this was a bluff?"

"You might be onto something. Can you contact the airport? Have them hold up their checkin procedures?"

"I'll try."

Twenty minutes or so later, Echika and Fokin arrived at the Oslo Gardermoen International Airport. Fokin drove past the parking lot and entered the roundabout. They got out of the car and made a beeline for the terminal, like they were racing each other. Echika swiftly shared information with the security room.

"It sounds like they're holding up passengers who match their descriptions at the checkin counter!"

"Good news. Let's go!"

Echika and Fokin sprinted ahead. The departures lobby had descended into mild chaos. Intersecting wooden pillars covered the ceiling, and the gray marble floor was covered with the shadows of countless passengers. Echika followed Fokin, weaving her way through, passing by people and Amicus.

The checkin counter came into view before long—Bigga and her father Danel were surrounded by security Amicus. Danel was arguing with the Amicus, while Bigga looked terrified as her father held on to her arm. A small crowd of curious passengers had formed around them, watching the strange argument.

"This is Interpol, out of the way!" Fokin held up his ID, parting the audience.

Echika followed him, and Bigga soon took notice of her.

"Miss Hieda...!"

She tried to hurry over, but Danel pinned her arms behind her back, holding her in place before claspng his large hand over his daughter's mouth. Bigga thrashed in his grasp but couldn't move—surely he wasn't going to kill her, was he? Still, it was clear that he was backed against the wall and panicking.

"This is as far as you go! Hands behind your head!"

Fokin and Echika both aimed their guns at him. Danel refused to listen, still holding on to Bigga. With the illumination shining down on him, his skin looked

tanned. The creases carved onto his face seemed as though they held the scent of the Fjord's winds.

Bigga stared pleadingly at Echika.

Please. Don't shoot my father.

"Where are your accomplices?" Fokin asked sharply.

"Long gone," Danel said through gritted teeth. "We were only there to help those who are ill and in need. Why won't you leave us alone?"

"We'd have left you alone if you weren't involved with E and hadn't attacked one of our investigators." Fokin shook his head.

"I know nothing about E. We only use their name, is all," Danel retorted.

"This is your second warning. Hands behind your head." Fokin breathed out.

"You were the ones who got my daughter involved in this!" Danel's angry shout echoed against the ceiling.

Echika stiffened. His green eyes, so much like Bigga's, glared at her with rage. He knew; he was aware his daughter was a civilian cooperator for the bureau.

She tightened the grip on her pistol.

"You recognized my face. Where did you look into me?"

"Electronic Investigator Echika Hieda." Danel refused to answer, narrowing his eyes. "You got my daughter to betray us. If my girl were to leave this place, she'd never be able to make a living. But now, you made her a traitor to her own people..."

"You have the nerve to say that when you're a bio-hacker yourself?" Fokin cut him off.

"Shut up." Danel looked ready to choke Bigga at any second. "What would you people know? You have no culture to protect. You forgot your pride you when became marionettes for the Your Forma... You sold your souls to a mechanical thread..."

He shouted out something in the Sami language. That same instant, Fokin fired his gun. The roar of the gunshot made the onlookers scream. The bullet

gouged into Danel's leg.

"You won't get a third warning!" Fokin shouted sharply.

The echoes of his words died down silently. For one long moment, Danel glared at Fokin. A minute or so passed. But eventually he came to realize he stood no chance and freed Bigga from his strong arms. Obeying Fokin's instructions, he slowly and carefully crossed his arms behind his head.

A wise decision. Echika exhaled in relief.

Fokin closed the distance between them and pinned Danel against the floor. He brought the luddite's arms behind his back and cuffed him. Bigga sat next to them the entire time, collapsed on the ground.

"Bigga."

Echika holstered her gun and hurried over to the girl. She knelt down, peering into her face. Bigga was biting her lips, which looked very pale. She didn't turn to look at Echika—her gaze was fixed on her father as he was being carried away.

Her eyes were filled with emotion beyond words.

She spoke just as Fokin pulled Danel to his feet.

"Dad." Bigga's voice was shaking, but there was a clear coherence to it. "I think you're right when you say we can't keep going like this. But that's true regardless of whether you're on E's side or not... The way you're going about it is all wrong. It won't accomplish anything..."

Echika thought back to her awkward smile from earlier.

"Even when I try to help someone, in the end, this is the only thing I know how to do."

"Bigga," Danel furrowed his brow. "You just don't understand. Don't listen to anything the bureau says, okay? They're just trying to fool you into—"

"I'm helping them of my own free will!"

Danel's eyes gazed at her in amazement. "What are you...?"

"Because..." Bigga's small jaw quivered visibly. "Because—I ruined Clara's

life!”



Her scream tore through the air. It was more pained and vivid than Echika had ever heard her. Bigga sobbed and curled up.

“W-we might have been able to save Mom, too! If we’d just let go of our pride and stopped rejecting technology... If we’d just let her get proper treatment... But we all... All of us, we...”

Her long braids spilled over the floor, drawing a sorrowful pattern. Echika simply placed a hand on Bigga’s back and said nothing. The girl’s spine, jutting out from her back, felt terribly fragile against Echika’s hands.

Danel had gone silent, appearing to have accepted his daughter’s outburst.

“...Let’s go,” Fokin said, spurring the man on.

But when Fokin took his next step, it happened.

Danel *lurched forward*.

Huh?

Echika stared in silent bewilderment as Danel unceremoniously toppled forward to the floor. His shoulders jolted as they hit the ground. Fokin couldn’t react in time, either.

Wait—

Bigga looked up, her eyes open so wide they seemed as though they might shatter.

“Dad...!”

What...just happened?

3

If Liza’s Brain Diving could be likened to anything, Harold thought, it would be to a speeding train.

It felt terribly dangerous, as though one wrong step might send her reeling off the rails while she threw one Mnemosyne at him after another. It was fundamentally different from Echika’s Brain Diving. In her case, it was like she would sink beneath the water without a single bubble, silent and confident. Like

a fish that had been born knowing how to swim.

The two women performed the same act of Brain Diving, yet there was such a pronounced difference between them. Putting it in Amicus terms, it was perhaps akin to two units of a different model or generation having different processing capabilities.

While needless thoughts like those disturbed his own processing, he found the Mnemsoyne they were searching for.

Harold pulled out the Lifeline, and Liza once again staggered visibly. He'd gotten used to catching her like this despite the fact she'd only Dived with him a handful of times.

"The manager of the electronic drug trafficking ring is in Paris's eleventh district. I've got their address," Liza said, glancing at the suspect lying on the pipe bed in the interrogation room.

They were one of the buyers HQ had arrested based on the results of their Brain Dive the night before. This single individual had yielded more information than they'd expected.

"We'll leave apprehending him to the Electronic Drug Criminal Investigations Department."

"Right. We're not the kind to go in guns blazing, after all."

Either way, this marked the end of a monthlong investigation. They shared the results of their Brain Dive with the Electronic Drug Criminal Investigations Department, filed their paperwork, and finished their duties for the day.

The Lyon HQ building was much more spacious than the Saint Petersburg branch and was manned by a staggering number of investigators. But of course, Harold was the only Amicus investigator here. This caused him to draw curious glances from his colleagues in the hall.

By the time they stepped out into the parking lot, the sun was already starting to set. Harold turned to take in the building. The sky reflected off the glass siding of Interpol's main branch, the structure that served as the Electrocime Investigations Bureau's base of operations. A cold wind drifted in from the Rhône River. It was just past eight PM.

“Harold,” Liza said, walking alongside him. “Could I have a bit more of your time after this, if you don’t mind? I’ve got something exciting to show you.”

“I don’t mind, of course.” Harold smiled back at her. She was his partner, so he felt he ought to try getting closer to her. “What is this exciting thing, though?”

“Is this your first time in Lyon?”

“I’ve been to HQ a few times, but I’ve hardly had any time to take in the sights.” He then appended the words he suspected Liza was hoping to hear. “I’d be glad to have you show me around, though.”

“Then allow me to take you to the Les Nuits de Fourvière,” Liza said, opening the door of her car with an exaggerated, theatrical gesture. “Come on in, then.”

Lyon was located in the Rhône-Alpes region of southeastern France. This city, which was graced with both the Saône and Rhône rivers, had developed as a periodic marketplace and had begun flourishing in the sixteenth century by trading in silk goods. Today, it was the second largest city in France, eclipsed only by Paris.

As far as Harold was concerned, however, it was the place where Echika had lived before they’d met. And indeed, since coming here, he had imagined more than once an image of her roaming through these streets, with their gentle colors. Echika, always dressed as black as a raven, must have looked as striking as a drop of ink splattered across a pastoral painting.

Try as he might to stop himself from thinking of her, he could not prevent those thoughts from aimlessly rising to the surface. He’d given up on trying to suppress them at this point.

Liza and Harold made their way to Fourvière Hill. This symbol of Lyon itself overlooked the entire city and housed the Basilica Notre-Dame in addition to a museum.

They paid a visit to a Roman theater nestled in part of the hill. Constructed in 15 BC, the majestic circular amphitheater was used as a facility for outdoor events even now. The stage was illuminated by artificial lights and surrounded by mortar-style seats. There was already quite a crowd gathered there.

“Oh, good, we made it in time. There’s still ten minutes until the performance starts,” Liza said.

Harold took a seat next to her. The seats were a good distance from the stage, but with his optical devices, it wasn’t much of a problem.

“I was sure you’d be showing me the cathedral instead. The Basilique Notre-Dame de Fourvière is quite famous.”

“It’s lovely, yes, but it’s not the main star tonight,” Liza said with a carefree smile. “There’s a wonderful show coming up. There’ll be Amicus performing, too.”

“Are you familiar with theater?” Harold asked softly.

“I wouldn’t call myself an expert on it, but I do like watching plays and acting, yes.”

“You’ve taken acting classes?”

“Back in school. I wasn’t very good at it, though. Some things you’re just better off giving up on, no matter how much you wish for them, right?”

“Indeed. There was a time when I wished I could carry a gun like any police investigator, but I’ve given up on that idea.”

“That’s a cute dream,” Liza said, looking amused. She seemed to have taken his statement for a joke. “Chief Totoki won’t really tell me the details, but I can tell. You really are a next-generation Amicus.”

“Are you pleased with me?”

“Yes, very. I wish all Amicus could be like you, someday.”

“Really?”

“Of course. After all—” Liza brushed her fingers through her hair and then furrowed her brow. “Oh, goodness... Did you see the news?”

She used her Your Forma to send a link to Harold’s terminal. He opened a holo-browser window, and it took him to a news broadcast that had just been streamed.

<<Oslo, Norway / Police clash with E believers, countless injured>>

The article stated that there had been a gunfight between the local police and E's believers at a bar in downtown Oslo. The circumstances behind it weren't clear yet, but Harold's system naturally responded to the mention of E's name. He thought back to a few days ago, to the post regarding the sensory crime incident.

The bureau was looking into E, but he didn't know how it was going. They hid information on their investigations from people, aside from those assigned to the case, so maybe there had been some progress. If nothing else, he hadn't heard anything about the believers targeting the bureau.

"I guess not everyone is so eager for Amicus to evolve," Liza said as Harold switched off the holo-browser. "I'm sorry. Maybe I shouldn't have shared that with you."

"It's fine. This doesn't bother me."

"I see... By the way, that post from E is generating rumors even inside the bureau."

Liza was unrelated to the sensory crime, but it seemed that she'd heard about it from someone. In fact, E's post was on an easily accessible anonymous message board. It was only inevitable that word would get out about it.

"I've heard. It's apparently causing quite the uproar."

"Well, I wouldn't call it that, but..." Liza paused, seemingly recalling something. "I completely forgot about your achievements. You were in charge of investigating the sensory crime, right?"

"Yes. Well, strictly speaking, Investigator Hieda was in charge of it."

"But you played an active role in solving it, didn't you? It was all people were talking about back then." She snuck a glance toward him. "...Is that post true?"

"You mean E's post?" Harold asked curiously, to which Liza nodded. "I'm afraid that's top secret. I can't disclose any information about it. Besides, *I don't remember much about the case.*"

“You’re joking, right? Amicus have a perfect memory.” Liza snickered and looked back to the stage. “Ah, it’s about to start.”

The color of the lighting softly changed, and before long, the crowd started to applaud. When silence once again descended on the theater, two actors appeared on the stage. One was human, while the other was an Amicus. Both faced each other, separated by a suspended gauze curtain.

It wasn’t unusual to see Amicus cast in plays in recent years, but their roles were limited to Amicus characters about 99 percent of the time. They mostly filled the supporting cast, and it wasn’t uncommon for them to not get any speaking parts. This time, however, things were different.

“It’s a story about a mathematician and an Amicus,” Liza whispered into his ear. “The mathematician is based on Alan Turing.”

“Wasn’t Turing born ages before Amicus were invented?”

“The story is that they’re meeting through a computer that links different time periods together.”

So this was a fantasy story. Harold ordered his system to stop trying to assume realistic coherence within the narrative. Instead, he switched it over to analyzing its philosophical propositions.

The mathematician actor began speaking to the Amicus.

“Am I truly connected to a different time period? Who are you?”

“I am a human, just like you,” the Amicus replied. “If you are unsure of that, feel free to test me.”

It was clear that their exchange was gesturing at the Turing test.

The Turing test—a procedure proposed by the mathematician Alan Turing in 1950 for distinguishing whether a machine possesses intelligence equivalent to or indistinguishable from that of a human being. The process was simple; the tester held a text exchange with the subject using a monitor.

Two people were tested; one was a human, while the other was a machine. If the machine’s identity went undiscovered, its intelligence would be acknowledged, and it would pass the test.

In the play, the mathematician believed that the Amicus was a human and started to befriend him. Harold didn't dislike the art humans produced. He appreciated drawings, music, and plays, and his system felt pleasant when he experienced them, as though it were being lubricated.

He casually glanced over at Liza. Her eyes were earnestly fixed on the stage. She watched the play with what seemed like yearning. Her long, slender lashes glowed in the lighting of the theater. Before he knew it, Harold's thoughts had once again drifted to Echika's face. To his encounter with her yesterday. To how she'd gazed directly at him when she got off the elevator, in spite of her lack of confidence. He could clearly remember the shiver in her voice.

"Even if I'm not your partner, it shouldn't get in the way of you getting what you want."

She'd been right. He was doing absolutely fine, even without Echika by his side. He'd likely get by with anyone. If finding Sozon's killer was all he wanted, it wouldn't matter if he worked with Echika or Liza—any electronic investigator with similar abilities would do just fine.

Echika's claims were true; he needed to stop thinking about her so much. But despite his efforts, he couldn't wrest control of his mind. No matter how many times he tried to shut his thought patterns down, they kept returning to her again and again.

Why?

His emotional engine throbbed from the unexplained sensation, accompanied by a faint note of irritation. Echika was the one who'd requested they be equals. As far as Harold was concerned, he'd attempted to live up to her wish.

But not only had she not depended on him, she'd also harbored those emotions without confiding in him. And then she'd bid him farewell without even letting him worry over her. More than anything, however, he was frustrated with himself for not being able to perceive what she was concerned with.

The play reached its final act, and the mathematician came to realize he was in fact speaking with a machine. Shocked at the fact that his test couldn't expose the truth, he pushed the Amicus away. As the mathematician closed his

heart from him, the machine told him thus:

“Your test did not lose its value. We have simply become too close to being human for it.”

But if Harold had truly become something verging on human, then surely understanding Echika would have come easier to him.

The play ended at ten PM. The stage lights dimmed amid applause that felt like a warm rain, seeing the production off. Liza and Harold got up with the other audience members as they prepared to go home. Something he couldn't quite comprehend still brewed somewhere in his system, but he'd enjoyed the play nonetheless.

“The Amicus was almost the main character,” Liza said, some excitement lingering in her voice. “And its acting was so good. Was it a next-generation model?”

“Maybe it is.” In truth, it wasn't that difficult for Amicus to study the intonation of particular lines and the expressions required of each scene, but Harold didn't want to shatter her dreams. “Thank you for inviting me tonight, Liza.”

“I'm glad you enjoyed yourself. Right, next time, we should—”

But just as she was about to walk away, it happened. Someone extended their arm from the seat above them abruptly and pushed her away. It was so sudden, Harold couldn't react in time; Liza tumbled to the seat beneath them before he could catch her. Thankfully, it was unoccupied, so no one else was caught in the attack.

“Liza!” Harold hurriedly jumped down the step.

She placed both hands on the ground and somehow managed to push herself up. Harold could see the scrapes on her exposed elbows, even in the dark.

“Huh?” Liza looked up, confused. “Someone just...”

Harold turned his eyes in the direction of the person who had pushed her and spotted two young men walking into the crowd. Zooming in with his optical

device, he made out a small tattoo etched onto each of their necks.

E.

Liza herself probably couldn't see it in the dark.

"Let's go after them," Harold said.

"Wait." Liza groaned. "I'm sorry, I can't stand up. I think I twisted my ankle..."

Harold hesitated for a moment—as an Amicus abiding by the Laws of Respect, he couldn't just leave Liza here in this state. Despite his misgivings, he concluded he should give up the chase this time.

Having come to this agonizing decision, Harold reached out to her, then carefully helped Liza to her feet and helped her sit down in one of the seats. He fetched Liza's pumps, which had come off earlier, and placed them back on her feet. Her knee was bleeding slightly.

"You need to see a doctor."

"It's not as bad as it looks. I'm fine," Liza protested, acting tough despite the fact that she couldn't move. "Did you see who pushed me?"

"Yes. It was an E believer."

Surprised, Liza glanced in the direction the men had fled to.

"I can't believe they'd show up here... Did they attack me because I was walking around with you?"

"Who's to say? There were other people around here with Amicus."

The chances that adherents of an anti-technology movement had come here to enjoy a play with an Amicus actor were slim. If anything, wasn't it more likely that they'd shown up to go after Liza? She was a member of the Electrocrime Investigations Bureau, after all. And while she wasn't connected to the sensory crime incident, the followers may have taken E's post as a go-ahead to start the game.

But still, civilians couldn't usually access other people's personal data. How would those two have known that Liza was an electronic investigator?

"Where were you heading to tonight, Liza?"

“Back to my apartment. I haven’t been there in three days...”

“I’ll escort you home, then.”

“Thanks,” she said sheepishly, rubbing her twisted ankle. “I think I’ll have to take you up on that offer. Sorry.”

“Don’t be. It’s my fault for not adequately defending you.”

“...Are you saying that because of your Laws of Respect?”

Harold simply smiled and lent her his shoulder wordlessly. Liza obediently entrusted her weight to him.



Liza lived in the third story of a snug apartment building on Pierre Scize Street, overlooking the Saône River.

“I’m really sorry, you didn’t have to do this much...”

They were met by a citrus aroma as they entered the living room. The apartment was painted a uniform apple green, and its French-style double-door window offered a view of the Saône River beneath it. The city lights glimmered mystically against the water.

Harold placed Liza on the sofa, and she immediately called her housekeeper Amicus over.

“Clay!”

“I’ve got the first aid kit.” A mass-produced female model Amicus appeared and started helping treat Liza.

It disinfected her wounds and applied a cold spray with an anti-inflammatory effect to her twisted ankle. Clay’s hair was braided, and she wore a cute barrette on her head. It was clear Liza doted upon the Amicus.

Harold casually glanced around the room again. It was tidy, without a single decoration out of place. It did feel a bit too large for one person, though. Did Liza give Clay its own room?

“Take a seat, Harold,” Liza said, watching Clay’s hands. “You can’t go home

yet.”

“Of course. We need to consult the chief about the two guys who pushed you.”

“Right. Plus, I’d like to thank you.”

Harold heard faint sounds coming from the kitchen. Clay had put something on the stove. Harold glanced over to Liza, then walked over to the kitchen. It was very clean and orderly. Sitting atop an induction heater was a stainless steel kettle, boiling water. From the dripper and coffee grounds at the ready nearby, it was clear that Clay was brewing Liza coffee.

Harold turned off the induction cooker and opened the kitchen cupboard to take out some mugs. There wasn’t much tableware in the cupboard; only two sets of cups, plates, and flatware. He glanced into the dustbin for good measure.

Harold had no doubt that there had been someone else living in this apartment other than Liza and Clay. It looked like they hadn’t been here for several months, too. He poured the coffee into the mugs and carried them to the living room, where he found Liza looking visibly shocked. She’d just finished tending to her wounds, and Clay was putting the first aid kit away. The Amicus glanced at Harold but said nothing as it walked off.

“I guess I took work away from her. I hope she doesn’t take it too badly.”

“Don’t worry about Clay,” Liza said, accepting the mug from Harold. “Thank you. You’re very considerate.”

“How’s your ankle?”

“The pain’s mostly gone,” she said, sipping her coffee. “I can hardly feel it. I think I’ll be able to walk tomorrow.”

“Just don’t strain yourself.”

“I’m fine, really. First aid kits are well-equipped nowadays...”

Their conversation trailed off. Liza placed her mug on the table. Her long legs were now crowned not with a pair of pumps but women’s slippers—Clay must have put them on her. Harold glanced at the inbuilt hearth on the wall.

“It seems your roommate hasn’t been here in some time.”

Liza’s eyes widened in silent surprise. It seemed he was correct.

“How did you know...? Heh, I guess it would be silly to ask you that.”

“Just a bit of deductive reasoning, nothing more. I saw two identical mugs in your cupboard,” Harold said as he turned his eyes to her again. “Your lover?”

“My brother,” Liza said with a hesitant smile. It seemed something had happened to him. “We got along really well, but then some problems popped up... He lives somewhere else now.”

“You must feel very lonely, living all alone here.”

“Yeah. But I have Clay, so...,” she replied laconically, bringing the mug to her lips again. Liza sipped the coffee, apparently shifting gears. “So about what happened earlier... Did you see the faces of the two guys who pushed me?”

“Yes. They were a pair of young men.”

“If they’re still stored in your memory, could you send their footage over to Chief Totoki? She might be able to track who they are by matching their faces with the user database.”

I see.

Quick, simple, and decisive. “I’ll be glad to if it’ll help.”

“Clay, could you bring the tablet and a cable over?”

A moment later, the Amicus approached with a tablet and a USB cable in hand. Harold accepted them and took a seat next to Liza. The scent of damask rose perfume wafted over from her.

“Um, Harold?” she asked, gazing at him. “Would you mind if I moved your left ear away?”

Harold smiled at that unexpected suggestion. “I see Clay’s treatment really did wonders on you.”

“I’ve been interested in it since the first time I saw it.”

“I don’t mind, of course, but I’d appreciate if you’d be gentle with it.”

“Hey, I’m pretty dexterous with my fingers, you know.”

Liza placed her warm digits gently on Harold’s left ear. Then she carefully moved it aside; indeed she was quite dexterous. She plugged the cable to the port behind his ear and connected the other end to the tablet in her lap. Harold’s memory system was called up externally and left his jurisdiction. A few seconds later, his memories of the attack manifested as images.

“There, this is it.”

Liza picked out a single image of the two believers who had assaulted her against the backdrop of the Roman theater. They were both typical Frenchmen, no older than twenty. Save for the letter *E* tattooed on their necks, nothing about them stood out.

“Looks like they’re both students. I guess they passed last month’s baccalaureate exam and just got accepted into university,” Liza said, using her Your Forma to look up their facial features in the user database. “Wasting their lives and futures for E like that... What’s gotten into them?”

“Liza, do you think there’s any chance they knew you were an electronic investigator?”

“Huh?” she seemed puzzled. “What do you mean?”

“Like we discussed earlier, E posted a conspiracy theory about the sensory crime. The followers then selected the Electrocrime Investigations Bureau as their next target, but until today, nothing had come of it. However.” Harold paused. “What if those men attacked you as part of their ‘game’?”

Liza seemed to have realized that for the first time now. Her pretty crimson lips parted in surprise, then closed before she finally uttered:

“But...I wasn’t involved in the sensory crime incident.”

“Yes. But it’s perfectly plausible you’d be a target if they’re targeting the Electrocrime Investigations Bureau as a whole.”

“But still, how would the followers know who I am?”

“That I don’t know, but E is suspected to be a cracker of some sort. If that’s true, it’s possible he’d be able to steal that information. Or maybe someone

sold it. Can you think of anyone who might have done that?"

"No, of course not. Ah, actually, wait..." Her expression visibly darkened. "I'm sorry. What I said wasn't exactly true. I might not be completely unrelated to the sensory crime."

"What do you mean?" Harold furrowed his brow.

"Hmm..." Liza bit her lips, as if wavering.

In contrast with how up-front and unashamed she'd acted so far, she now seemed somehow fragile. Harold heard sounds from the kitchen, likely from Clay. Then silence once again descended on the room. A car horn echoed briefly in the distance.

Suddenly, Liza reached out for Harold and wrapped her arms around him in an embrace. She pressed her soft body against his, and her dark-blond hair brushed against his cheeks. The scent of hair oil tickled his smell device.

It had been quite sudden, but Harold wasn't particularly surprised.

"Liza..." Thinking in the space of a second, he returned her embrace. "What's wrong?"

Liza's breathing suddenly became thin and tormented.

"I think...E knows about my brother."

"Meaning?"

"My brother...was an electronic investigator, just like me," she whispered into his ear, pained. "He was, yes, he was involved with the sensory crime incident... He Dived into the infected victim in Paris. He drove himself to exhaustion and got sick, but forced himself to keep going, since every second counted...but he really wasn't in any state to make a Brain Dive. So..." Liza swallowed in an agonized manner. "So..."

Harold rubbed her on the back soothingly. Her brother hadn't returned in months. It could only mean one thing.

"Did your brother...break down?" he asked.

Liza tightened her grip.

“Yes,” she said in a voice that bordered on a whisper. “His ego was muddled... He can’t hold a conversation anymore.”

Ego muddling was one of the symptoms that electronic investigators could experience when they broke down. It happened when their data processing grew unstable due to fatigue, or when they handled a data load that exceeded their tolerance level.

During ego muddling, the Diver’s Mnemosynes mixed with those of their target, making it impossible for them to distinguish which experiences were theirs. In severe cases, it could cause their personality to completely fall apart, which was classified as a type of mental disorder. In other words, it was possible to relieve the symptoms of ego muddling, but a complete recovery of the condition was very difficult.

“This must be what I deserve,” Liza said, putting serious conviction behind her statement. “I get to stay healthy and keep working... Injuries this light aren’t enough of a punishment for me.”

“You’re being irrational.”

“I know that. But I can’t help but feel this way...”

Harold couldn’t sympathize with how a human felt toward their siblings. His perception of familial love was completely different. Logically speaking, however, he could understand it well enough to grasp the despair Liza was going through.

“You said you and your brother were close.”

“Yeah. We were only a year apart... We didn’t really get along well with our parents.” Liza buried her face in Harold’s shoulder, clinging to him. “But my brother, Clay, and I always worked together to overcome whatever life threw at us.”

“Where is he now?”

“In a medical recuperation facility. I hate to say this, but...Clay and I can’t really look after him on our own.”

“I’m sure he understands how much it hurts you.” Harold brushed his fingers

through her hair, patting her on the head as if calming a child. “It must be hard spending your days all alone. You poor soul.”

“I’m fine... I go visit my brother once every two days, too.” Liza took a deep breath, trying to calm herself. “My brother...he never really liked working as an electronic investigator. But the way the world is now, you can’t exactly go against the aptitude test’s results and take up another career, you know?”

“Because of us Amicus and the robots.”

“No, that’s not it. My brother loved you Amicus, too. But honestly.” Liza paused, suppressing something. “...It would have been better if he’d had the talent to go along with that aptitude. I’m sure most electronic investigators feel the same. We all *wish we could be geniuses*.”

We all wish we could be geniuses. To not just be a disposable pawn, forced into the position by aptitude, only to be crushed under the strain. To be a real electronic investigator.

“Like Investigator Hieda?” Harold whispered, and Liza’s shoulders jolted. “But even a genius like her ended up losing her position.”

“...Yes, that’s true. I suppose it might be wrong of me to feel that way.”

“Please take better care of yourself, Liza.”

“I’m sorry. I let my emotions get the better of me.” She pushed herself off his chest and embraced the tablet this time. “...You Amicus are so kind. I always end up fawning on you. It’s a bad habit of mine.”

“I’m glad to hear that. We exist to support humans, after all.” Harold smiled calmly and gazed into Liza’s lovely face; she stared back at him with fragile eyes.

Her clear eyes burned with emotion, wavering under her lashes. He reached out and touched her hand, gently removing her fingers from the tablet and clasping them softly in his own. They didn’t feel cold anymore. They had the warmth of human hands.

“Harold...”

“Liza, please correct me if I’ve got the wrong impression.” He felt her fingers

tense slightly. “You want to know the truth about the sensory crime incident, don’t you? That’s why you brought it up earlier.”

Liza held her breath for a moment.

“That was just idle talk,” she said. “Manipulating people’s minds isn’t possible. It sounds like occult nonsense.”

“There are no humans here, Liza. Won’t you be honest with an Amicus?”

“...I believe the bureau.”

Liza held the tablet against her chest and hung her head. Her palm felt awfully sweaty.

“E’s post is groundless,” Harold said. “I can guarantee it as someone involved with the sensory crime incident.”

“I feel the same way, of course. My brother put his life on the line for that case. Nothing about it is being kept under wraps.”

It felt like she was somehow trying to convince herself of that. But of course, Harold’s words were a lie. Taylor’s attempts to manipulate minds were a definite part of the sensory crime incident. But he preferred telling lies if keeping the truth of the case in the dark set people’s hearts at ease.

Maybe it was his Amicus “conscience” that had spurred him to do that. Either way, he wasn’t sure how much his words really sank in for Liza.

“When something unreasonable happens, humans have this nasty habit of trying to find an explanation for it, you know?” She unplugged the cable from her terminal. “I’ll send this footage over to Chief Totoki.”

“Yes, please do.”

“Harold.” Liza unplugged the connector inserted into his port.

But then she stood on tiptoe and brought her lips to Harold’s cheeks.

“...Thank you.”

Liza was, in all likelihood, far more awkward than she thought herself to be.

Bigga's first memory of her mother was that of a frozen, midwinter night sky.

"See that, Bigga? That's the son of the Sami's ancestor."

When she was little, she would sit on her mother's lap every night during winter and gaze at the starry sky. Even now, those memories came to life with vivid silence, dyed with colors of ultramarine.

"Do you remember the story I told you?" Her mother pointed an emaciated finger at the trio of stars making up Orion's Belt. "Once upon a time, the child of the son descended upon our land and found his bride. Do you remember what happened next?"

"They had three sons!" Bigga replied cheerfully.

"That's right." Her mother gently patted her hair.

"And, um, those sons held a knife, a pot, and an arrow!" Bigga recounted the story her mother had told her the other day as she pointed at the sky, hoping to be praised. "And, uh, which star was the sun's son again...?"

"Then which star is Boahjenástir?"

"That one!"

Bigga dangled her small legs and stood up on her mother's lap. She looked up at the north star, Boahjenástir, and spun in place with dancelike movements. Once she got dizzy, she fell down on her back-side. Snow splashed into the air and fluttered back down gently.

"You're such a little scamp."

Left with no recourse, Bigga's mother pulled her daughter up. Bigga loved the faint warmth that radiated from her fingertips. Filled with joy, she embraced her mother tightly. Her mother softly hugged her in return. Bigga wished they could stay like this forever.

But...

"You really are such a spoiled girl..."

Just then, Bigga noticed something over her smiling mother's shoulder. A single streak of light falling across the night.

“Ah...” Bigga held her breath gently.

For the Sami, shooting stars were heralds of an ending. The people of the past earnestly believed that a wind blew where stars fell. Filled with inexplicable dread, Bigga clutched even more tightly on to her mother’s arm. It felt as though the star might take the woman away that moment if she didn’t.

Her mother had been ill for some time now. Last weekend, her father had taken her to the most trusted town doctor in Kautokeino. When they got back, they told Bigga, who they’d left by herself that night, that there was “nothing to worry about,” but she knew. She heard her parents talking night after night. The town doctor had recommended that her mother go to a hospital outside the technologically restricted zone.

“I don’t want to leave,” she’d heard her mother say. “I’ll be defiled by the Thread Brains’ technology if I go out there. I want to rest in peace here, with the reindeers...”

“We don’t know for sure yet.” Her father held her mother’s hand. “We can count on Ed and the others. They’re all skilled bio-hackers. They can make medicine to help you.”

“Stop it. I don’t like that technology. I let you do it so far because it’s your job, but I really—”

Bigga never told them she’d been eavesdropping, of course. Young as she was, she knew in her heart that she was intruding upon something best left untouched.

“Let’s go home. We need to make the tapestry.” Bigga’s mother tugged on her arm gently, not having noticed the shooting star.

“...Are we going to sell that one in Oslo, too?”

“No, we’ll be putting it up at home. We’ll be weaving it with dyed threads, so its color won’t fade even when you grow up to be a big girl.”

“I’m already a big girl!”

“Yes, yes.”

Bigga squeezed her mother’s hand tightly. Her mother nostalgically hummed

a *joik* as they walked. *My small, cute, one and only daughter.* The sound of her improvised song melted into the silvery night.

The seasons turned and came full circle, and on Bigga's ninth winter, her mother passed away. That night, too, Bigga had seen a shooting star from the window. Her mother's cold hand stiffened, and her emaciated cheeks also hardened and clung to her bones. The warmth she loved so much had disappeared.

Her mother's disease might have been treatable outside the restricted zone. But both of Bigga's parents, along with everyone they knew, wouldn't make the choice to go there. They hadn't even considered it in the first place.

And so Bigga had never brought it up, either.

"W-we might have been able to save Mom, too! If we'd just let go of our pride and stopped rejecting technology..."

These were awful words, and if she could help it, she would have never said them. Her mother would surely be saddened to hear her daughter speak like that.

But she couldn't avert her eyes from the truth any longer.



"Bio-hackers go through a ritual when we complete our training to officially enter the fold."

The sickroom in Oslo University Hospital was thick with the scent of disinfectant. Echika was sitting next to Bigga on a sofa by the window. Midnight had already come and gone, and the hospital was silent. The most they could hear was the occasional hum of a passing cleaning robot's motor.

Lying asleep on the bed was Bigga's father, Danel. He'd abruptly lost consciousness shortly after being arrested at the airport. An emergency crew hurried over in short order and examined him with their portable diagnosis AI, discovering that the oxygen concentration in his body had plummeted. After that, he'd been rushed to the Oslo University Hospital.

According to Bigga, the ritual was to blame.

“What kind of ritual?” Echika asked, unable to mask her confusion.

“Well, simply put, they insert a chip into their neck that makes them seem dead,” Bigga said, her head hung.

Sitting in her hand was a tiny square chip the surgeon had removed from Danel’s body. “It’s so they won’t be resuscitated if they’re caught, or so they can escape if the bureau catches them... It’s a state of apparent death, but it’s only meant to last for a few hours.”

The chip intentionally lowered the oxygen bonds within the body, slowing metabolism down to a crawl to create a state of false death. The effect only lasted for two hours, but the technique was “like magic” and could allow them to regain consciousness without sustaining any nerve damage. The only issue was that it didn’t always work properly.

“Apparently, the chip has a high probability of malfunctioning, so bio-hackers rarely resort to using it. They mostly just have it inserted as a rite of passage...” Bigga had been crying for a long time now. “I didn’t think Dad would go that far.”

Echika turned her eyes to Danel. His dry eyelids were closed. The operation had wrapped up a short while ago, so all they could do now was wait for him to wake up. He wasn’t showing signs of regaining consciousness for the time being, but the doctor said he was stable.

“The whole thing is insane to begin with. Can’t say I’ve heard of any medical institution doing it.”

“That’s because bio-hackers researched and developed the technique on their own. I think it’s suicidal, too,” Bigga said, gripping the chip. “But...despite that, my father thought it was better to try activating it than to get caught by the Your Forma users. If it malfunctions and you die, it’s just fate.”

She smiled in self-derision, as if to call it ironic.

“For how much we reject the Your Forma, we wound up being dependent on technology to survive, too...”

Echika thought back to Danel’s shouting earlier.

"If my girl were to leave this place, she'd never be able to make a living."

"What would you people know?"

"You sold your souls to that mechanical thread..."

Echika clenched her teeth unconsciously. She and Harold had brought in Bigga as a civilian cooperator. Honestly, Echika didn't think she understood the Sami's pride all that well, but what Danel and his fellow bio-hackers were doing was clearly a crime. One could even say that to an extent, their very existence was helping increase the influence of a criminal organization.

But on the other side of that coin, the Sami would surely cease bio-hacking if they were given proper work. Unfortunately, the main industries they once dominated had long since been replaced by robots and Amicus. From the perspective of both labor costs and efficiency, both governments and corporations would be unlikely to reverse the current state of affairs.

In other words, this was a complicated issue without a clear solution.

"I know it's too late now, but...I'm sorry for taking off on my own," Bigga said in a feeble voice. "I could only think about myself... And you got hurt because of that..."

Echika realized Bigga was talking about how she'd barged into the followers' bar on her own.

"It's nothing serious," Echika said, placing a hand on her lip to show the cut. "Anyone would panic in that state."

"Still, it was really stupid of me."

"It's fine." Echika rubbed Bigga's back, trying to comfort her. "When did Danel realize you were a civilian cooperator?"

"I don't know, but he might have realized it shortly after the sensory crime... I didn't think he'd look into you, though."

"He was just that worried about you, I'm sure."

Bigga's eyes were quite red from hours of sobbing. More tears welled up in her eyes. This ruthlessly sincere silence was eating into both of their hearts.

“I always thought being a bio-hacker was an amazing way to help people.” Bigga’s gaze fell to her fingers. “That’s what my parents always said, and I believed it, too... But the older I got, the more I realized something was wrong about it.”

“Because of what happened with Lie?”

“That might have been what really made everything click. But on second thought, I might have realized it much sooner,” she heaved, sobbing. “My mother...died of cancer when I was little. After discovering the tumor, the doctors told her that they could treat it if she went to a large hospital right away. But she didn’t want to leave the technologically restricted zone.”

Bigga went on to tell Echika that her father had honored her mother’s wishes. Both of them valued their pride over their lives.

“I just can’t understand that. Pride is important, I get that, but Mom dying was so much worse than losing it... But no one else seemed to feel that way. I couldn’t talk to anyone about it. I started to think maybe I was wrong...”

Echika silently hugged Bigga’s shoulders. That was all she could do. The fact that she couldn’t empathize with her pain actually made it hurt all the more for Echika. Bigga cared for her parents so deeply because they’d raised her with so much love. Her love for her family was so strong that her mother’s passing had been a huge blow to her.

Yet the joy she felt being with them only increased the agony of parting from them.

“Did you tell Danel this?” Echika asked.

“No.” Bigga rubbed her eyes. “I should...tell him when he comes to. And then ask him if he really works with E...”

Ideologically speaking, it was easy to understand why the bio-hackers, like the luddites, would idolize E. But Echika hadn’t encountered anyone calling themselves E’s apostles. Danel claimed they were only “using E’s name.”

Suddenly, her Your Forma brought up an untimely notification pop-up. It was a message from Investigator Fokin. He was working with Investigator Sedov to track down Danel’s two escaped comrades. They’d caught both of them and

brought them to Oslo's police department.

At the end of the message, Fokin had appended:

I just got to the hospital parking lot. Can you come over?

"Sorry, I need to step out for a second." Echika softly pulled Bigga away from her. "Will you be all right on your own?"

"I'll be fine. Did Investigator Fokin say something?"

"Yeah. They caught the other two."

"Right... I'll be fine. Don't worry about me." Bigga nodded stoutly.

Echika was concerned, of course, but all she could really do here was offer the girl a shoulder to cry on. She would be doing her a bigger favor by seeing the investigation through. Echika got off the sofa and made to leave the sickroom... before stopping by the door.

"Bigga." Echika turned around, still uncertain. "Um... If you want to quit being a civilian cooperator, just say the word. I know it won't be easy, but I'll do anything I can to help you."

I'm responsible for dragging you into this in the first place. Echika almost said this aloud but was able to stop herself. And how did Bigga interpret what she did say? Rubbing her red, swollen eyes, the girl regarded Echika with a stiff smile.

"It's the other way around, Miss Hieda," she said, forcing out a bright, cheerful tone.

"...The other way around?"

"If there's anything I want to quit...it's not being a civilian cooperator," Bigga said, momentarily looking like she was trying to hold back tears. "But I won't be able to stay with Dad if I do..."

'I need to think this through,' she whispered, waving good-bye to Echika.

This time, Echika turned around and left the sickroom. Her heart felt terribly heavy for some reason. But in the end, this was an issue Bigga would have to resolve herself. And that was why...it would be terribly haughty of Echika to

think that they were culpable for smashing her life to bits.

Stepping into the parking lot, Echika was greeted by a night breeze colder than she'd expect in summer. Investigator Fokin was leaning against an SUV's roof, his hair ruffled and his jacket muddied. The chase had been quite strenuous, it seemed. He let out a tired sigh as Echika approached.

"That's a pretty long face you're wearing, Hieda. What, you hungry?"

"Maybe you should look at yourself in the mirror before you talk, Investigator." Echika took after Fokin and leaned against the car. "Good work out there. Where did you end up catching those two?"

"Near the Swedish border. They split up after cutting off the tablet's GPS signal. Turns out they were planning on crossing Sweden and Finland and then meeting up in their hometown of Murmansk."

"Danel was trying to board a flight." Echika narrowed her eyes. "That means... they took different means of transportation to shake us off?"

"No, looks like Danel was the only one with other plans on his docket. He was supposed to act on his own after leaving the bar to begin with."

"Do we have any proof of that?"

"This. It was in Danel's things." Fokin produced an evidence bag from his pocket. Inside it was an old-styled passport made of paper, the kind luddites used when boarding planes. Back then, Danel was being held up at the check-in counter. Since he couldn't have bought his ticket on the day of the flight, he must have tried preordering one on an automatic machine.

And its destination was for...

"...Lyon?" Echika asked, glancing at Fokin's face.

"We can't tell if this is connected with E, but it's worth looking into." He shrugged. "Even in that situation, he was adamant enough about going there to take his daughter along with him."

"But he said he only used E's name, right?"

“The other two were spouting the same excuse. We checked all their online terminals, and there’s no traces of them communicating directly with E. That being said, if E did hire them, it’s unlikely they’d leave any evidence behind.”

“Since we can’t Brain Dive into them, we can’t tell if they just matched their stories or if they really are unrelated to E.”

This was what made luddites who didn’t have Your Forma tricky to deal with. Investigators could keep interrogating them, but in the end, this took several times longer than a simple Brain Dive.

“Except...” Fokin rubbed the nape of his neck. “Sedov says the manager of that bar knew those three. Apparently, the manager let Danel’s group use the bar as a meeting place for the believers to expand E’s influence. That’s why they called themselves apostles.”

What?

“That makes it even harder to believe those three had nothing to do with this.”

“I think so, too, but that still doesn’t rule out the possibility they’re just zealous fans. I’m not going to take them at their every word, but it’s true that technology has made life harder for some people. E is like a messiah to them.”

Echika couldn’t quite wrap her head around this sentiment herself, but she couldn’t deny it altogether. Regardless, E had evaded them at every turn so far. Though she still had her doubts about E hiring some shady “apostles” to do their bidding at this point, Danel had used a tablet to accept work from Your Forma users. It wouldn’t have been difficult for him to learn of E’s existence.

“But either way, there’s no doubt those three are sympathetic to E’s ideology,” Echika said.

Until Danel regained consciousness or the other two gave testimony that backed this up, however, the case would be at a standstill. It would be a waste of time to focus on them to try to advance the investigation.

In which case—

Echika saw Fokin wave the boarding pass at her.

“I think we both had the same idea just now.” He glanced at Echika. “So is Lyon’s *tarte aux pralines* really as good as they say? That red cake.”

Echika couldn’t mask her exasperation. *Seriously, this guy...*

“You contact HQ’s Investigation Support Department. I’ll order our flight tickets.”

Just as Echika said this, a memory of Harold, who was on his way to HQ at Lyon, crossed her mind.

YOUR FORMA

Chapter 3

Works of Fire



Chapter 3

Works of Fire

1

Lyon, France. Interpol HQ stood on Charles de Gaulle Street, along the Rhône River. The building was well-designed and resembled a squarish glass box, which made for quite the contrast with the otherwise old-styled townscape.

“I just learned this morning that the investigation into E is going to become a joint effort between our division and the Electrocrime Investigations Bureau.”

“...What do you mean?”

Echika stood beside Fokin at the security gate by the entrance to the building. The biometric identity verification and simple body scan completed in seconds, granting them access. The floor inside was decorated with the Interpol emblem, which was illuminated by sunshine pouring down through the open roof. Looking up, Echika saw the connecting passage and capsule-like elevators of the upper floor, along with lush plants placed inside. It felt less like they were in a building and more like they were in a courtyard.

Echika and Fokin had arrived in France the evening before. Bigga’s father, Danel, had been carrying a boarding pass for Lyon. The pair had asked HQ’s Investigation Support Department for permission to come over in hopes of looking into Danel’s connection with E.

“Why are we working with Electrocrime Investigations?” Echika couldn’t help but ask. “We’re nowhere close to needing an electronic investigator to Brain Dive.”

“Beats me.” Fokin raised his eyebrows. “Anyhow, they told us to go to the Electrocrime Investigations Bureau without stopping by the Investigation Support Department. Guess they’re leading the investigation instead... You

think you'll be all right?"

"It's work. I'll be fine," Echika answered, trying to appear unfazed. "Any word from Investigator Sedov?"

"Not yet. It'll take a while for him to come up with anything."

Sedov alone had stayed behind in Oslo. He was to work in tandem with the local police to interrogate Danel's comrades and conduct an inquiry into the bar that served as the meeting place for E's comrades.

"How are things going on Bigga's side?" Fokin asked.

"Nothing yet." Echika shook her head. "Danel is still unconscious, after all."

Truth be told, she could hardly bring herself to leave Bigga all on her own in that state, but she had no choice. Sedov had said he would come in from time to time to check on her, though Echika couldn't see Bigga being too happy with that arrangement.

Echika and Fokin made their way to the Electrocrime Investigations Bureau's office on the fourth floor. She recognized a few faces in the spacious office. Thankfully, none of them seemed to pay much attention to them on their way to the chief's office. The door was wide open, but Fokin knocked on it anyway before going in. Echika followed a step behind him.

Section Chief Ui Totoki was seated at her desk, dressed in her usual gray suit.

"You're early, Investigator Fokin," she said, looking up from her desk's built-in PC monitor. "Thanks for coming, too, Hieda. I've heard you had quite the time in Oslo."

Totoki's treatment of her hadn't changed from before. Echika was grateful for it.

"I believe you've heard about the boarding pass," Fokin said. This was his first time meeting Totoki, but since investigators could view each other's personal data, there wasn't much need for introductions. "Why did your department decide to cooperate with us now, of all times? I've heard you've taken command of the case, too."

"You have nothing to worry about. My personal policy is to take good care of

my subordinates and my cat,” Totoki replied, without so much as a smile. “You see, two nights ago, one of our electronic investigators, Investigator Robin, was attacked by E’s followers. Fortunately, her injuries were light.”

Investigator Robin. Echika immediately recognized the name. She was Harold’s new partner.

“So the bureau decided they couldn’t just take the attack lying down.”

“Correct. We cooperated with the Investigation Support Department in rounding up believers last night. We’ve actually just started Brain Diving into them,” Totoki said, checking her Your Forma’s notifications. “And it looks like the top brass is going to announce our involvement in the investigation to the press.”

“So the idea here is to keep them in check.” Fokin nodded.

Listening to their exchange, Echika felt doubt cross her mind. Would it really be that easy? The hatred with which E’s followers had attacked her in the bar was genuine. It felt like they would leap at any opportunity to exact justice, so the bureau getting involved would do little to curb their enthusiasm for their “game.”

“Today is an even-numbered day, right, Chief?” Echika asked. “Has E made any moves?”

“Not yet. They always post around noon. The only thing is...E might have some way of contacting their followers outside of that thread.”

“What do you mean?”

“E hasn’t uploaded anything about Investigator Robin’s attack,” Totoki said with a placid expression. “The suspects are keeping quiet and won’t even confirm if they attacked Robin knowing she was an electronic investigator. We’re hoping our Brain Dives will yield more useful information.”

“Would you mind if we observe the Brain Dives?” Fokin asked.

“Of course not, you’re welcome to watch.”

Having gotten permission, Fokin left the office. Just as Echika made to leave with him, her gaze met Totoki’s. The chief’s expression was just as stony as

before, but there was also a hint of concern in it.

“How’s work over at Investigation Support been treating you?”

“...I think I’ve been managing just fine.”

Echika had to hand it to the aptitude test—the transition to working as a police investigator had been smooth. On top of that, she wasn’t having any trouble with her coworkers, as she had during her time as an electronic investigator, so in that regard, you could argue she was actually doing better in her new position.

That was why Echika couldn’t just tell Totoki that she couldn’t get comfortable.

“I see.” The chief seemed to be relieved. “That’s good. Feel free to reach out if you have any problems.”

“Thank you.”

Echika left the office for real this time. Shaking off a certain sentimentality that clung to her, she made her way to the interrogation room. But the moment she opened the door, she was instantly taken aback. Fokin was standing in front of the one-way mirror, and standing beside him was a familiar German man.

“Hieda? What are you doing here?”

An electronic investigator with short beige hair and a squarish face stood to one side—her former partner, Benno Kleeman. She had seen him during the emergency meeting a few days ago, but it had been a while since they’d been face-to-face.

“Hello.” Echika could only greet him brusquely. “I came to observe the Brain Dive.”

“Observe it?” Benno regarded her doubtfully before he noticed her current affiliation in her personal data. “Oh...so that’s what’s going on. Well, my condolences.”

“Aide Kleeman,” Fokin called out to him. “Is Robin okay with Diving into her attacker?”

“The top brass insisted we put our most skilled Diver on this job. They want to

make a show of how seriously they're taking the investigation into E."

Echika moved her eyes to the one-way mirror. Lying on the cots were the two believers that had staged the attack. Standing before their beds was Electronic Investigator Liza Robin. Her exposed knees and elbows had suture tape on them, and an anti-inflammatory patch had been applied to her ankle. These must have been the injuries from the attack.

Standing by her side was a custom model Amicus. Echika tensed up slightly.

It was Harold.

He looked the same as he had the last time they talked. His delicate facial features, the faint mole on his right cheek, his familiar waxed-up blond hair. Echika recalled their exchange in the elevator. Her chest naturally clenched with emotion. What twist of fate had placed those two investigators in charge of the case?

"This is impressive, though," Fokin told Benno. "They can handle parallel processing?"

"Yeah. And the crazy thing is, her numbers were even lower than a Belayer like me a year ago," Benno replied. "Her data processing keeps rising; she's practically a 'genius.' And to top it all off, she's insanely pretty."

"Agreed on that front. The aptitude test must be bugged to hell if it didn't recommend her for a modeling career."

Ugh, men. Echika glared at the two of them, silently appalled.

Echika couldn't tell if what Benno said about Liza was true, because she'd been isolated from her coworkers. The Electrocime Investigations Bureau's office at HQ was divided in two based on the investigators' ability scores. Echika had only left Lyon six months ago, so she hadn't shared the office with Liza.

Cases of electronic investigators with data processing speeds that continued to grow were rare but not unheard of. In other words, Liza was a "real genius."

"Aide Kleemann, could you share the results of the Brain Dive with us when it's done?"

"Of course. It should end in a few minutes."

Echika stared at Harold blankly. Despite the fact that he should have been focused on the Mnemosynes being transmitted to him, his eyes were fixed on Liza. He was bracing to move in case his partner showed any unusual reactions. For no reason in particular, a desire to flee surged through Echika.

“...Investigator Fokin, I’ll be waiting at the office.”

Before she knew it, Echika had already left the interrogation room. She could have stayed there, but it felt like the childish part of her heart was about to rear its head. With every step she took into the corridor, a creeping sense of reality washed over her. It felt like her legs were bound with shackles.

I can never go back to being an electronic investigator again.

And the only thing she had to show for it was the secret she’d selfishly chosen to keep.

“If you do change your mind, I don’t particularly care if you publish the truth.”

Lexie’s words from a month ago suddenly came to mind. True, letting go of the secret might lift the weight off her shoulders. If her Diving abilities weren’t going to recover, she shouldn’t have had to bear the burden of this sin, to cling to the one Belayer who’d matched her. To say nothing of doing it to compensate for her loneliness.

And yet...she didn’t feel the slightest bit inclined to expose it.

How stupid can I be?

Echika walked into the office with heavy steps and immediately noticed something felt wrong. Looking around, she spotted the bureau’s members all gathered in front of a flexible screen on the wall. Totoki was there, too.

“Did something happen, Chief?” Echika called out to her and looked up at the screen...only to shudder.

Just like at the emergency meeting from a few days ago, that thread was displayed on the screen. Yes, come to think of it, it was just past noon. Lines of text were on the screen—E’s new post.

[The Electrocrime Investigations Bureau cannot get away with hiding the truth of the sensory crime incident.

The architect of the cover-up is Senior Investigator Ui Totoki. She lives in an apartment building just south of Part Dieu Station, the southern room on the fifth floor, with her pet cat. Pursue the truth and deliver justice.]

Posted by E / 14 minutes ago

“It seems E’s finally out to strike at the people related to the sensory crime incident,” Totoki said.

Sure enough, E listed spiteful hints to pinpoint the addresses of other investigators involved with the incident. They’d leaked the personal information of nearly ten investigators, Benno among them. It wasn’t limited to HQ, either; investigators from other branches, in cities where infected victims appeared, were also mentioned in the post.

“How does E get such thorough information...?” Totoki muttered to herself, but Echika wasn’t listening.

Because her own name was listed on the post.

[Electronic Investigator Echika Hieda knew of Elias Taylor’s thought manipulation but held her tongue. *She is hiding a grave secret* even now. Hieda is staying at a hotel near Petersburg Square on the fourth floor for the time being. Bring justice upon her.]

Posted by E / 14 minutes ago

Why...?! Echika felt chills run through her body. E knows about the secret—about the RF Models’ neuromimetic system and the truth of the Laws of Respect?! It can’t be. How?!

“No wonder they call themselves ‘the brain peeker.’”

Had E peered into her mind without her even knowing it? That couldn't be. All this talk of their power to read minds was just occult nonsense.

"I can't believe they were able to write about your Matoi, too." Totoki's whisper brought Echika to her senses. "It is detailed in the investigation report, but how did they get their hands on it?"

It seemed she assumed the secret E was accusing Echika of withholding was about Matoi's existence. But the post specified that she was hiding a secret "even now." Echika pointed the wording out to Totoki.

"E's just exaggerating the facts to rile up the believers," Totoki replied. "My post says I was the architect of the cover-up, but I don't have that kind of authority."

That was a convincing explanation. There shouldn't have been any reason E would know about the secret. But did this mean they were able to steal confidential information about the sensory crime incident? Echika couldn't shake off her anxiety.

Just calm down for now, she admonished her heart, which was beating like an alarm bell.

She turned her back to the screen and made to walk off, like something was spurring her forward. Just then, she bumped shoulders with someone.

"...Investigator Hieda?"

Echika stiffened at once. It was Harold, of all people. He was on his way into the office after finishing the Brain Dive. Walking beside him was Investigator Liza Robin. For a moment, Echika's gaze clashed with Liza's.

"Why are you here?" Harold asked, sounding as distant as expected. "I thought you were in Saint Petersburg."

"No, um... We were ordered to perform a joint investigation with you." She was almost pathetically flustered. But she was the one who'd pushed him away. "More importantly, E just uploaded a post—"

Suddenly, one of the investigators raised his voice in alarm.

"Chief Totoki, this is terrible! Your home is—!"

The screen switched over to E's followers' forum. The latest post included two images. One was a screenshot of a map of the area around Part Dieu Station. And the second was a picture of a burning apartment.

Totoki's home was on fire.

2

South of Part Dieu Station, the area around Totoki's apartment on Paul Bert Street was in an uproar. The blaze had already been extinguished by the time Echika and Fokin arrived with Totoki, but there were still several fire engines lined up along the road. Residents who had fled the fire were supporting one another. Thankfully, no one had gotten hurt.

Totoki had been speaking to a local police officer for a while after she told them she was going to get permission to enter. Beside her, a handcuffed believer was being carried off. He was a middle-aged man with a melancholic face, his round back hunched as an officer forced him into a police car.

"Apparently, he's a past offender," Fokin said bitterly. "He served four years in jail for producing explosives."

Echika used her Your Forma to browse the suspect's personal data, since it was shared with them by the Electrocrime Investigations Bureau. The user database did indeed mention a criminal record. That said, it was from over a decade ago, so it was pretty old. Based on the man's work history, it seemed like he'd been trying to reintegrate into society. Had he started idolizing E's beliefs somewhere down the line?

But the suspect's criminal record didn't matter right now.

"There was only about ten to twenty minutes between E's post and the arson," Echika said. "Personally, I think that's much more important. It doesn't feel like the believers were stirred into action by reading the post, but more like..."

"...Like they knew where the Chief lived to begin with and were waiting for E's post." Someone finished her sentence.

Echika tensed up and looked around. Harold was staring fixedly at the

building with an expression that said that this was, indeed, what he believed. Liza stood at his side, her hands clasped over her mouth in shock.

Having received the news, it made sense for the Investigation Support Department to hurry to the scene, but these two—and more specifically, Harold—had said they wanted to see it for themselves and tagged along.

“Hey,” Fokin whispered into her ear. “It’s not time for Electrocrime Investigations to get involved yet, is it?”

“Yes, but Chief Totoki probably thought letting him see the scene of the crime might end up being helpful.”

“I hear he’s more efficient at analysis than any mill robot. Can’t say I believe it, though...”

“Investigator Fokin.” Harold suddenly grinned at him. “If you’re looking to try a *tarte aux pralines*, there’s an association-endorsed *bouchon* I can recommend.”

His piece said, the Amicus left, walking over to Totoki with Liza following him. Left behind, Fokin gave Echika a bewildered look.

“...Did you tell Aide Lucraft about that?”

“Not a word.” She shook her head. “This is why they call him efficient.”

It wasn’t long before Totoki got permission, and they were all allowed to enter the building. Her apartment was on the fifth floor, and there was a security Amicus standing in front of it who willingly let them through. The room was already full of tiny, ant-like mill robots gathering evidence, and they were asked to tread carefully so as to not step on them.

“Ganache?” Totoki called out desperately for her cat. “Ganache, where are you? Are you okay?”

The burnt smell hanging in the air was quite terrible, but the chicly designed apartment was for the most part untouched. The blaze had mostly affected the living room, so the bedroom was intact.

Totoki searched frantically for Ganache before she found it in the bathroom. The white Scottish fold was curled up in the bath, terrified. Its fur looked a bit

singed, but it was otherwise unharmed.

“Ganache! Oh, thank goodness, I wouldn’t know what to do with myself if anything happened to you...!” Totoki hugged the cat, her usually blank, stone-faced expression completely absent.

Ganache meowed softly in her arms, still trembling in fear.

“Chief, don’t you back up its data?” Fokin asked curiously. “I mean, it’s a pet robot. If worse came to worst, you could just restore it. You don’t have to panic—”

“I don’t want to see my little baby suffer!” Totoki glared at him, then rubbed her cheek against Ganache. “Oh, there, there. You must have been so scared...”

Fokin retreated a few steps back, shocked by his superior’s sudden transformation. Echika simply pretended not to see it. Still, she was glad Ganache was fine. Backup or no backup, Totoki would have gone off the deep end if anything happened to her cat.

They went to the living room, where they found Harold and Liza. Harold carefully walked around the terribly burnt sofa and table. As observant as he was, Echika doubted he was familiar with arson scenes. Not to mention how awkward the situation was.

“Any clues, Aide Lucraft?” Totoki asked, stepping into the living room with Ganache in her arms. “It looks like the suspect broke the front door’s security system to come in.”

“Yes. On top of that, it seems he came here before E’s post went up.”

“What makes you say that?” Liza asked, shocked.

“The screenshots of the image board were uploaded sixteen minutes after E’s upload went up,” Harold said, checking the post in question on his terminal. “Even assuming the suspect happened to live nearby, they would need to get into the apartment building, break the door’s security, and start a fire. They wouldn’t have enough time to do that if they were relying on the post for instructions.”

“So you think E personally contacts some of their followers and gives them

info ahead of time?”

“I think that’s the most natural conclusion here. I’m not sure what they’re getting at, but I believe E wanted an instigator to start the game.”

Attempting to keep cool, Echika looked down at the rug, which was crawling with analysis ants. These small, pinky-sized robots had bodies made of silicon and moved with small quick steps, like insects. Their antennae moved to and fro as they hurriedly scattered in every direction.

“So let’s assume E has a means of contacting their followers individually,” Fokin said. “E’s been active for over a year and a half. How come we’re only finding out about this now? The Investigation Support Department’s been after them this whole time, but none of the followers were linked to E. Even if the believers were hiding it, someone would have dropped a hint.”

“There’s the possibility E changed their methods just recently,” Totoki said, glancing at Liza. “Investigator Robin, did the Brain Dive into your attackers yield anything useful?”

“They weren’t connected to E,” Liza said, furrowing her brow in disappointment. “They just attacked me because I was walking around with an Amicus. But it’s fishy that it happened at a time like this... Still, Mnemosynes don’t lie.”

“It’s strange,” Totoki said, seemingly unconvinced. “We’ll have to see if the arsonist knows something next.”

Echika thought back to the slender, haggard believer she’d glimpsed earlier. If they could Brain Dive into him and figure out how E got in touch with him, it would be a big step toward unmasking them.

“Anyway, I put in a request for a Brain Diving warrant. Investigator Robin and Aide Lucraft, you two head back to HQ.”

“Got it.” Liza nodded, then appended in a worried tone, “Chief, if you’d like, we could take care of Ganache for you? It’s been shaking the whole time...”

Totoki glanced at Ganache, curled up in her arms. Like Liza said, the cat was still visibly frightened. It was burying its nose between Totoki’s arms and armpit, refusing to look at anyone. Its behavior was so pitiful it was hard to

believe it was actually a robot.

“Yes, maybe keeping it here would be a bad idea. But it’d be more scared if I’m not around, and well, it won’t get in the way of me working.”

“You still have things to do. Let them take care of it,” Fokin piped in from the sidelines.

Totoki glared at him for a moment, but eventually deposited Ganache in Liza’s hands, albeit reluctantly. The cat didn’t seem very scared, leaning against Liza’s chest. Totoki seemed somewhat displeased with that, because she then sullenly muttered:

“...Could you bring him to the office?”

“Understood. There, there, it’s all right, Ganache. There’s nothing to be afraid of anymore.”

Liza left the living room with Harold. Echika made a mental note of the woman’s friendliness with machines. She was probably an Amicus sympathizer. In any case, the two of them were out of sight, and Echika felt her body relax.

Yet something was still bothering her about E.

“Investigator Fokin,” Totoki said, pulling herself back together. “Ask the Investigation Support Department for backup.”

“I’ve already made the call. But what about the personal information posted on the thread? With the state your place is in, there’s a chance the other investigators might end up being targeted, too.”

“Yes... We’ll need to make sure the people involved with the sensory crime incident are staying somewhere else.”

The wind blowing in from the open windows wouldn’t be nearly enough to clear the scent of the smoke clinging to the room.



The long and short of it was that it turned out the arsonist believer wasn’t personally connected with E.

Confirming the Mnemosynes Liza was sending his way, Harold frowned. It

seemed the arsonist had been planning on setting fire to the apartment beforehand as a way of getting involved with E's game. He'd used a homemade Molotov cocktail to drown Totoki's home in flames. He had a past record of producing explosives, and his knowledge on the matter was still intact.

But the most important part was that the Brain Dive had shown no indication that the man was in contact with E. He really had set his plan into motion before the thread in question went up.

Something was off.

Still feeling doubtful, Harold touched on the next Mnemosyne flowing his way. It was of the moment the suspect had uploaded the image of Totoki's house to the thread. Prior to that, he'd also been involved with the discussions surrounding Bastille Day, chatting with the other believers about fireworks. These were all ordinary, unassuming discussions.

In the end, the Brain Dive yielded nothing useful. Having finished the Dive, Harold left the interrogation room with Liza. As the door closed, he glanced one more time at the suspect, unable to shake off his irritation.

He thought they had gotten E by the tail this time, but it turned out they had slithered away from them once again.

"This isn't going anywhere," Liza said, biting her lower lip in frustration. "Harold, I know your theory is right, for sure. E is definitely in touch with some of the followers."

"But we can't find any evidence of it. Are they erasing their own Mnemosynes in some way?"

"If they were, I think we'd notice," she said, seemingly biting a nail. "But, right... What if we're mistaking what's in the Mnemosynes?"

"You think the believers might be communicating with E using some kind of cipher?"

"I mean, putting aside anything that large-scale, maybe we're overlooking something."

Harold reflected on the sensory crime. Back then, they had a shallow

understanding of what to look for, so it had taken them too long to notice how the virus infected its victims. That being said, however, it didn't seem like there were any similar subtle hints in the Mnemosynes of these believers. Were they missing something again?"

"Speaking of this, are you feeling all right, Liza?"

Liza blinked in confusion at his question. "I'm fine. Why?"

"Nothing, really. It's just that you went through more counter-currents than usual today, so I was a little concerned."

Liza had Dived into countless counter-currents earlier and toppled over more dramatically than usual when they finished. This made Harold worry. He couldn't quite explain it, but he got the feeling she was under severe strain.

"I'm fine. Really," Liza replied with a cheerful smile. "Don't worry, I won't end up like Investigator Hieda."

She seemed to think he was concerned about the possibility of losing another partner. When they returned to the office, they found most of the investigators clocking out, since it was past seven in the evening. Echika and Fokin were nowhere to be found. Meanwhile, Totoki was glaring at a screen with Ganache in her hands. Projected onto it were E's thread and the believers' forum posts.

Even the chief couldn't mask her disappointment when they reported the results of the Brain Dive.

"I think we have to admit our investigation is on the back foot this time."

"Have any other investigators gotten hurt?" Liza asked.

"No one else has so far. We've gotten them some temporary lodgings for the time being, so they aren't staying in their hotels or homes," Totoki said, scratching Ganache's chin. "I'll spend the night here in the office, too. I've got plenty of work to handle anyway... And this place should give a good view of the fireworks, too."

"Fireworks?" Harold tilted his head.

"It's July fourteenth today, right? It's Bastille Day," Liza told him. Right, that was today. "They shoot fireworks from Fourvière Hill every year here in Lyon."

It's a big event."

"I didn't know." He hadn't been to France before he was reassigned to the Electrocrime Investigations Bureau. "It might be nice. Would make for a good way to lift our heavy spirits."

"I'm sure it'll make our spirits at least a gram or so lighter," Totoki joked with a straight face. She must have been quite exhausted. "Anyway, you two rest for the day. If you're going to watch the fireworks, you better hurry before you can't find a spot."

"I think I'll pass this year. Going around outside feels dangerous right now..."

Liza feared a repeat of what had happened at the Roman theater. She was, of course, indirectly involved with the sensory crime incident through her brother. And the investigators who'd had their details exposed on the thread today, as well as Echika and Totoki, were all involved with the incident, too.

Yet curiously, the post had neglected to mention Harold. It was possible he was overlooked because he was an Amicus. But E was an anti-technology activist, so if there was an Amicus—a walking embodiment of technology—who was so deeply involved with the sensory crime incident, how would they simply ignore him?

If E knew the personal data of everyone involved with the case, then logically, they would be aware of Harold, too. Even if E wouldn't immediately address his existence, they would at least implicate Harold along with the rest of the investigators involved.

Am I actually overlooking something?

"I see the little one's calmed down." Liza reached out and rubbed Ganache between the eyes. "It stopped shivering a little while after we left the apartment."

"Yes, thank goodness. That was the one thing I was worried about."

The once terrified mechanical cat was now resting snugly in Totoki's arms. It closed its eyes in pleasure at Liza's scratching. By the time they entered the bureau, Ganache was already cheerful and energetic. So much so that it basically sprinted through the entrance, filled with curiosity over its first visit to

the headquarters... But in reality, its spatial perception program probably just kicked in and stirred the mechanical pet to do so.

"I'll be leaving now, Chief," Liza said, wistfully letting go of Ganache. "You rest up, Harold. Don't rack your brains over the case too much, okay?"

"I won't. May as well take the chance to enjoy the fireworks."

"Good idea," said Liza. Just then, however, she suddenly narrowed her eyes. "...Did you make a promise to watch them with Investigator Hieda or something?"

Harold couldn't help but crack a smile. "What makes you think that?"

"She looked really preoccupied with you." Indeed, Echika had behaved stiffly this afternoon. "And you being as kind as you are, I figured you'd ask her about it."

"My stance is that I'd prefer to look after my current partner," Harold said.

"No, I didn't mean it like that." Liza denied his words.

"Please don't worry, Liza. Be careful on your way home."

Still seeming a bit frustrated, Liza gave Harold a polite *bise* and left the office. As she did, Ganache pricked up its ears and hopped out of Totoki's arms. It seemed to have grown worried after seeing Liza leave. Totoki exhaled through her nose.

"Your talent is staggering, really," the chief said, clearly in sarcasm. "Is there a woman out there you can't charm into submission?"

"I'm looking at one." Harold smiled. "I know well enough to be polite around my superiors."

"Smart of you," she said, rubbing her neck. "But still... It looks like *both of you* are doing well for the time being."

"Meaning?"

"Hieda's getting on just fine at Investigation Support, too," Totoki said, gazing in the direction where Ganache had tottered off. "I paired you and Hieda together because I thought you'd work well together...but maybe I shouldn't

have put that much hope in her talent.”

With that said, the chief went after her cat, leaving Harold standing there on the spot. Staring at the back of Totoki’s gray suit, he envisioned Echika in her place.

This wasn’t about whether work was going well for her or not. There was something much more fundamental at play here. She’d probably realized it already.

Liza was right. Maybe he did need to have a conversation with Echika.

*

Days were long in Lyon, but even so, night was about to overtake the city. The car ferrying Echika and Fokin to their lodgings drove through the Presqu’île district. Countless people were gathered in the streets along the Saône in anticipation of watching the fireworks display later that night. Security Amicus dispatched by the local police were busily patrolling about.

“I’m jealous,” Fokin grumbled in the driver’s seat. “They get to have fun while this case is giving me a headache.”

“Same here.”

Though the media was streaming the Bastille Day celebrations, some outlets were also reporting on the arson incident. The fact that a police investigator’s apartment had been targeted caused quite the stir. Some programs picked up on E’s post regarding the thought manipulation conspiracy theory, and researchers started arguing about its validity on message boards online.

Of course, all the experts insisted that the theory had very little credence. Even if they actually felt that there was some validity to it, none of them wanted to publicly support E.

“The chief called earlier and said the Brain Dive didn’t turn up anything useful.” Fokin sighed for what felt like the umpteenth time that day. “At this point, we may as well go back to trying to figure out Danel’s boarding pass.”

“I agree... We should start investigating in earnest tomorrow.”

Echika used her Your Forma to access the anonymous message board TEN. It was full of believers rejoicing, including in E's thread. The attack on someone involved with the sensory crime incident hadn't done much to progress the "game" or expose the truth. Yet it made them gleeful just the same.

[Cast judgment on the lying demons.]

[Let's hope our comrades squash the bureau like bugs!]

[Looking forward to the fireworks already.]

[Who do we go after next?]

[Fire it up high.]

[Finally, something to get excited for!]

They shared links to videos and articles about the attack on the apartment, and many French users posted about the Bastille Day celebrations. It seemed tonight, at least, the followers were occupied with the fireworks display.

Their share car pulled over in front of the hotel. Totoki had arranged the medium-sized lodgings for her, and it wasn't related to the bureau in any way. She'd also made Echika's reservation under a false name. It was the perfect place to hide.

"All right then, Hieda. On the off chance anything happens, let me know right away," Fokin told her from the driver's seat as she got out of the car.

"Thanks for giving me a ride." She bowed in gratitude. "Are you going back to the original hotel, too?"

"Yeah, I've got no connection to the sensory crime case," he said, shrugging. "I'll come pick you up tomorrow."

She parted ways with Fokin. After watching the car's taillights disappear into the distance, Echika walked into the hotel. The place looked fancy on the outside, and its interior was of course very neat and well-designed, too. Not many people checked in at this time of day, and there were few guests in the

lobby.

As Echika finished her checkin formalities at the front counter, her thoughts continued to run. E's post clung to her mind.

"She is hiding a grave secret even now."

And yet the thread made no explicit mention of the RF Models. If E were to make another move, it would be on the next even-numbered day at noon.

Was Totoki right in thinking this was just another exaggeration of the facts? Or was there more to it than that? No...even more importantly, could E truly read people's minds?

E had accessed confidential information on the sensory crime incident that was stored offline. Moreover, the idea of them being a mind reader did seem convincing, what with how they had doxed Totoki. Typically, however, you would assume that no one but a Brain Diver could peer into people's heads.

In that case, their previous theory about E being a cracker must have been correct. Did that mean E had a mole in the bureau? But something felt off about that angle, too; most of the conspiracy theories E reported on weren't related to the Electrocrime Investigations Bureau.

Does E have agents in every organization...?

No, that couldn't be true. E had many followers, yes, but the people with this kind of negative outlook on things weren't the majority. Besides, anyone who went to work for a police organization underwent rigorous background checks upon being hired.

But how else would E get their hands on such accurate information?

As she left the counter, a thought suddenly occurred to her. Matoi had also been a secret locked inside her memories. But then the sensory crime incident happened, and Harold—

Just then, a chill ran through Echika's entire body, cutting off her musings.

“What...?”

It happened so abruptly Echika couldn't brace herself. Her field of vision spun at once, and her back hit the hard floor with a thud. She looked up, and her eyes met those of an unfamiliar man leaning down on her. He was a medium-built Frenchman, and his personal data popped up in her field of vision.

But Echika didn't have the presence of mind to read it. Because carved onto his arm was a tattoo of the letter *E*.

A believer.

Echika swallowed nervously. How? Her reservation was under a false name, and she hadn't shared any photos of herself with the hotel. There was no way they could have leaked information on her being here. Hesitation painted over her thoughts.

“In the name of a society that acknowledges the truth...!” The man raised his fist.

Echika reflexively reached for the pistol holstered at her leg. Before she could draw it, however, a shadow cast down on her from her side, and the man's weight suddenly vanished from atop her. Out of nowhere, a uniformed local police officer intervened, ramming into the man. The two tumbled to the floor, tangled together, but the officer soon got to his feet and instantly pinned the man down.

“Keep your hands on the floor!”

“Stop it, let go of me!”

“Don't resist!”

Shouts came in from every which way as several more investigators hurried over to help. The entrance to the hotel shook, and Echika remained stunned, her hands still on the grip of her pistol. There was a dull pain in her back, but she wasn't concerned with it right now.

“Are you hurt?” One of the investigators came up to her and helped her to her feet. “You should get out of here.”

Just what had happened? Echika hadn't called the police. And even if she had,

they wouldn't have gotten here this soon. She got to her feet and watched the policemen walk away. She staggered back a few wobbly steps, when suddenly she felt someone grab her by the shoulders from behind.

"I'm glad you're safe." Echika stiffened at the familiar voice. "I spotted a suspicious man following you around and pointed it out to an investigator on patrol, but...they only just made it in time."

It can't be. Why?

Echika turned around...and found Harold standing behind her, like it was the most natural thing in the world. He was dressed in the same outfit he'd been in when they'd parted ways at Totoki's apartment. His refined features broke into a smile of relief as he left go of her shoulders.

Echika parted her lips to speak, but her voice wouldn't come out right away. After all...

"Why?" She finally managed to ask. "Why... What are you doing here?"

"I had a personal matter to discuss with you, so I waited outside the hotel." *What?* Had she been so lost in her thoughts she completely missed him? "I'm glad you're safe and sound."

Harold tried to hold her hand, but Echika hurriedly pulled away from him. She was still confused... No.

He was waiting outside the hotel?

"How are you here? I never told you where I was staying."

"Yes." He retracted his hands in disappointment. "But I inferred you'd be here based on the hotels Totoki would choose from."

"Still, you're not a stalker. You could have just talked to me at the bureau..."

"I said I had a personal matter to discuss with you, did I not?"

Echika wasn't sure how to feel about this. Just a few hours ago, it had seemed like her relationship with him had reverted to being distant. But now Harold was acting like he'd completely forgotten their partnership was annulled.

Had she been the only one feeling awkward about this all along?

“Anyway.” Echika couldn’t banish her anxiety, but she tried to change the subject. “I need to call Chief Totoki.”

The officers cuffed the believer and were heading their way. As they passed them by, Echika’s gaze intersected with the man’s, and she realized he was an employee in an apparel shop in Lyon. His eyes roiled with dark, silent hatred.

For a moment, she couldn’t tear her eyes off him.

“...E knows everything.” The man spat out quietly. “Tonight’s fireworks will blow it wide open.”

The officer pushed the man forward, ordering him to shut up and walk, and escorted him out. A crowd of onlookers gathered outside the hotel, drawn in by the racket, and were booing and jeering at the man.

But Echika hardly heard them.

Fireworks?

“You should rest for a bit,” Harold said, opening his wearable terminal’s holo-browser. “I’ll make the report to the chief.”

Wait.

Echika felt something cold slither down her spine. On the train to Oslo, Investigator Fokin had said something about the followers’ message board:

“The French posters especially; they’re just talking about fireworks.”

And in the thread she saw earlier...

“Looking forward to the fireworks already.”

“Fire it up high.”

All of those could be interpreted as them talking about the Bastille Day fireworks display. At least, that was what the investigators had believed. But now...

“Tonight’s fireworks will blow it wide open.”

“Aide Lucraft.” Echika looked up at Harold at once. “We have to get back to HQ. Now.”

“Yes,” he said doubtfully. “That’s what I was planning on doing, of course, but why?”

“I’ll explain while we move and contact the chief. Is your car outside?”

“Yes, I’ll take you to it.”

Harold walked ahead of her, looking unconvinced. Echika followed him. The moment they left the building, the enthusiasm of the rubberneckers watching the arrest hit them. She called Totoki on her Your Forma, weaving her way through the crowd.

“Hello, Hieda?”

Her superior’s calm tone only served to inspire panic in Echika for some reason. Because if her suspicions were correct, the believers were planning to...

“Chief, you have to check the bureau right away. I think *there might be explosives set up in HQ somewhere.*”

3

The vicinity of the Rhône River in front of Interpol HQ was packed with spectators awaiting the fireworks display. The crowd had grown unbelievably from the size it had been when Echika had left a short while ago. Security Amicus and local investigators patrolled the area, watching the pedestrians. They kept the roads open so that cars could pass through in case of an emergency.

Echika and Harold parked the Volvo in a lot around the corner.

“Do you really think someone hid explosives in the bureau?” Harold asked from the driver’s seat.

“I don’t know, of course. But that’s the best thing I can associate with the word ‘fireworks,’” Echika replied, racking her brains all the while.

E hadn’t written anything about attacking the bureau in their thread, but it was perfectly plausible the attack on Totoki’s home would incite their followers to take more radical action. On top of that, it was nighttime, and countless people were walking the streets. This was the perfect opportunity to mingle

with the crowd to approach the bureau and attack it.

“It’s true that even the believers’ forums are full of posts about the fireworks, but... They don’t seem to mean much,” Harold said, deep in thought as well. “Every single package brought into the bureau gets scanned at the distribution management room. If any dangerous materials are discovered, they get confiscated at that point.”

“What if some of the police officers are believers and brought in explosives? No...” Echika realized the chances of that were slim as soon as the words left her mouth. “They’d get caught by security if they tried that... What about the arsonist?”

“He has a past record of producing explosives, but he had no way of hiding them on his person.”

Suspects were put through a rigorous physical examination, so objects on their person were seldom overlooked.

Am I really just jumping to conclusions here?

After parking the Volvo, the two of them left the car right away and began walking toward the building. As they did, Echika felt anxiety settle in again. There were a few entrances into HQ besides the front door, but they all had security gates. There was no way of sneaking past them, and anyone trying to walk through them without finishing the scan would get stopped by security Amicus.

Though Echika could have written off the believers’ posts as nonsense, she couldn’t shake her sinking feeling. E had been ten steps ahead of them at every turn, after all.

Echika and Harold made straight for Totoki’s office at the Electrocrime Investigations Bureau.

“Hieda, I’m glad you’re okay. You too, Aide Lucraft.” In contrast to how she’d been on the phone call earlier, Totoki now looked terribly busy. Her eyes were darting here and there as she operated her Your Forma nonstop.

“What’s going on?” Echika asked.

“I started getting flooded by messages after your call... E’s followers are assaulting other people connected with the sensory crime incident. And this was after we changed everyone’s lodgings.” Totoki was calm, but she was definitely seething on the inside. “I have no idea how the information could have leaked.”

Echika exchanged glances with Harold. Not only had Totoki personally told each person about their new lodgings, but she had also made their reservations herself. Only she and the affected investigators should have known where they were staying. With the exception of Harold, no one else could have been aware.

And yet this information had not been lost on E, who sent their followers out to get them. Calling it an unusual situation would be putting it mildly.

“We’re transporting a large number of arrested believers. We’ll have the local police hand custody of the believer that attacked you over to us, too,” Totoki said briskly. “After all, we’ll need to Brain Dive into every last one. We have to figure out how E’s contacting their believers and stop this chain reaction as soon as possible.”

“Understood.” Harold nodded. “I’ll call Liza over right now.”

“Chief,” Echika chimed in. “About the explosives I mentioned earlier...”

“I informed the higher-ups about it. We’re having security Amicus comb through every floor, but it’ll take about an hour for them to go through the entire building. Oh, and also...” Totoki massaged her temples and looked up. She’d gotten a message. “Hieda, could you do me a favor and look for Ganache? I lost sight of it earlier.”

Totoki couldn’t talk any longer, as she had to take a phone call. Echika and Harold had no choice but to leave the office. Echika still had things to ask the chief, but they would have to wait. She held back the urge to sigh. Echika could relate to how she felt, but now didn’t seem to be the time to worry about her cat... On second thought, maybe it was because the situation was so tense that she was worried about her pet.

“Anyway, I’ll look for the explosives and Ganache, Aide Lucraft. You go back and Brain Dive.”

“I’ll help you out until Liza gets here.” Harold opened a holo-browser and sent his partner a message. “We can’t do much until we get a warrant.”

“This is an emergency if I’ve ever seen one, so I’m sure they’ll wake up the judge to get one soon enough.”

Saying this, Echika left Harold behind and walked off. If the security Amicus were searching the building, she figured she had nothing to lose by checking the distribution management room. She wanted to confirm that there weren’t any suspicious parcels there. With that thought in mind, Echika headed to the elevator alone.

“Didn’t I say I would help? Please don’t leave me behind like that.”

Harold headed after her, seeming slightly displeased. Echika stiffened. She fell silent and tapped the first floor button. The Amicus stood by her side without even checking what she’d pushed. Things had been so tense that she’d forgotten the situation and started acting normally around him. Not that she hadn’t lost sight of things in the heat of the moment before.

The doors closed and the elevator began its slow descent.

“Where do we start checking?” Harold asked her.

“The distribution management room,” Echika said, trying to feign composure. “It’s a long shot, but better safe than sorry.”

“Sound reasoning.” He snuck a glance at her. “...I’ve been meaning to ask, but where did you get that wound?”

“Huh? Oh.” Echika touched the scab on her lip. “Well, a lot happened in Oslo.”

“A lot, huh?”

“Yes. A lot.”

“At this rate, it feels like you’ll get into trouble and die without me knowing.”

She glanced up. Harold wasn’t looking at her, his gaze instead locked on the elevator floor indicator. She couldn’t read his handsome face. Where had that comment come from?

“I am a police investigator, you know. I’m not that weak.”

“My apologies. I didn’t mean to offend.”

She couldn’t fathom what he was getting at. The elevator stopped at the first floor, and they got off. The distribution management room was on the north side of the building. They strode through the empty corridor with hastened steps.

“Still,” Harold said from behind her. “I’ve been questioning this ever since Chief Totoki’s residence was attacked, but...something feels off.”

“What?”

“The believers’ objective was originally to participate in a game that would prove E’s posts are true, right? But attacking the people involved with the sensory crime incident wouldn’t achieve that.”

“I considered that as well, but for the believers, anyone involved with the incident might as well be sinners. It stands to reason they’d act this way.”

“That much is true, for individual followers. But *something isn’t adding up about what E is doing.*”

Echika stopped in her tracks and turned to face him. Harold halted, too. He brought a hand to his jaw, mulling things over.

“The person inviting the believers to play this game is none other than E. If their objective is to expose conspiracies, it doesn’t make sense that they would order their followers to exact justice on the people involved.” His blinking seemed slower than usual. “Is this sequence of events not all built around finishing the game?”

Finishing the game—in other words, grasping the truth about the sensory crime incident. And the case files on the incident were stored in the vault.

“E probably knows where the case files are. If I were E, I would be thinking, ‘How can I get my believers into the vault?’”

The game demanded that the believers themselves confirm the truth of the case. The followers had used that as a pretext for committing crimes in the past, but this time, E would need to send the believers into the bureau itself. The thing was, you couldn’t get into the vault without approval from the president

of Interpol, so those documents were nigh impossible for outsiders to access.

But then Echika recalled what Totoki had said in the emergency meeting all those days ago.

“The only other avenue of entry into the vaults is the emergency unlocking system that activates during power outages.”

A power outage. Fireworks. Echika felt all the blood drain from her face.

So that’s their plan.

If there were explosives planted anywhere in the bureau, they wouldn’t be in the distribution management room. And they wouldn’t be on the top floors, where the security Amicus were searching. And it went without saying that they wouldn’t be in the cafeteria or terrace.

“The generator room...!”

Echika broke into a panicked sprint, and Harold followed after her. They turned back the way they’d come, scrambling for the staircase by the elevator. The dark stairs led to the underground level; Echika raced through it, feeling like she was being sucked into a black hole. At the bottom of the stairs, they came upon an elevator meant for carrying in supplies and a corridor leading straight ahead.

The doors in the corridor led to the machine room and the pump room. The building’s life support system, in other words. Normally, there would be security Amicus standing on guard here. Except now there wasn’t a single Amicus in sight, and the door at the end of the corridor—the door to the generator room—was ajar.

Had it been left like that when the security Amicus checked the place? No, that felt like far too convenient a coincidence.

“...Aide Lucraft, cover my six,” she told him.

“Understood.” Harold nodded. *“Do be careful.”*

Regardless, they needed to find out if there were explosives in there. Echika drew the pistol holstered at her leg and slowly inched down the corridor. She took one slow step, then another, muffling her footsteps. Harold seemed to be

following her. It was only ten meters or so, but it felt like a terribly long distance.

Echika finally reached the door to the generator room and heard the faint whirring of machinery inside. It was too quiet. Echika slipped the muzzle of her gun into a gap in the door, confirming nothing unusual was happening inside.

She took a deep breath and pushed the entrance open with her shoulder, then readied her pistol at once. It was a dreary room, reinforced by concrete. In front of her were a collection of mechanical spears, from which thick pipes extended to the ceiling. At the center of the room, a security Amicus stood in place. Its eyelids were closed; it was clearly in forced shutdown mode. And a white mass was stirring at its feet.

Echika froze, dumbfounded for a moment. It was a white Scottish fold—Totoki's cat.

"Ganache?" She lowered her gun, surprised. "What is it doing here...?"

Hearing its name, the cat replied with a happy *meow*. It made to walk over to her when, suddenly, something glinted in the air. The battery unit on its back was open and exposed, and attached to it was a thin wire.

It can't be.

"—with her pet cat."

In the space of a moment, it all clicked into place. The believer who'd set fire to Totoki's home had a past record of producing explosives. The fire was only a bluff to divert the bureau's attention away from Ganache. His true objective was to destroy the Interpol headquarters' generator room.

She could see a *small handmade explosive device* inserted into the mechanical cat's back. The arsonist had modified it. An impromptu wire was tied around the fuse, extending to the security Amicus's wrist.

Oh yes. This'll produce some "fireworks" all right.

Ganache ran over to them. Echika tried to push Harold away behind her. She saw the wire stretch and tighten.

"Echika!"

Something propelled her backwards. A flash of light? She couldn't even tell.

By the time sight and sound returned to her, the first thing she felt was heat. Then she realized she was gazing into darkness and hearing the shriek of a fire alarm. Something heavy was weighing her down. Echika tried to focus her vision but couldn't quite manage it. The air filling her lungs was thick with an unusual scent.

"Are you all right?" She heard Harold ask in her ear.

Only then did she realize that he was hanging over her, cradling her with his body. Over his shoulder, she saw sizzling flames dancing in the air. The ceiling lights were off. This was definitely a power outage.

Everything had gone according to E's plan.

Echika felt terrible. She'd realized what E was up to but hadn't been able to stop it.

"What about you?" she asked Harold, but opening her mouth made a cough escape her lips. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine." He got to his feet. "Can you move? We have to get out of here, now."

Echika took Harold's hand and pulled herself up. The shock wave from the blast had knocked them into the middle of the corridor. Her entire body ached with pain, but she seemed to have gotten away without any major injuries. It was probably thanks to Harold covering her.

Her heart twinged with pain. He'd protected her again. Echika looked back to the generator room; the explosion had started a fire that was now a raging blaze. The sprinklers weren't containing it at all.

Needless to say, the security Amicus and Ganache were nowhere to be found. They'd probably been blown to smithereens. Echika felt sorry for them, but there wasn't much she could do about it right now. Totoki's sorrowful face

sprang to mind, and she tried not to dwell on it.

“What about the emergency power supply?” Echika asked, bringing a hand to her mouth. On top of the smoke hanging around the ceiling and making it difficult to breathe, it was terribly hot. “Did the explosion in the generator room cut it off?”

“So it seems. The bureau’s security systems are totally down.”

What came next wasn’t too difficult to imagine. Echika thought back to the crowd of spectators gathered on the road outside earlier. The crowd was a perfect place for E’s spectators to lie low in. E would likely inform them of the bombing, and the moment they found out the building’s security was down, they’d force their way in. Echika felt a chill run down her spine.

We have to at least protect the vault.

“Dammit,” she swore under her breath. “We need to tell Chief Totoki as soon as possible—”

“The fire alarm went off, so the bureau knows about this.” Harold pressed a hand to her back. “Echika, don’t breathe too deeply right now. You might inhale some smoke.”

The two of them ran through the corridor and into the staircase. A thick fireproof shutter had come down, blocking their path. This must have been a security measure that automatically kicked in whenever a fire was detected.

Echika immediately reached for the evacuation door at the side of the shutter. It should have let them go through, but the door’s lever wouldn’t budge. She pushed against it hard, but it remained completely shut, like it was frozen in place.

“What?” She checked the door, confirming there weren’t any locks. “What’s going on?”

“I can only speculate, but there’s likely some kind of obstacle on the other side, or something that’s keeping the lever from lowering.”

So we’re trapped in here? Give me a break...!

“Still!” Echika managed to say. “There wasn’t anything here when we came in.

I can't imagine someone just brought in a large object while we were in there."

"Yes, but I don't think there's any other explanation but to assume someone did." Harold hesitated for a moment. "...Maybe this was the plan all along."

"Huh?"

"Someone brought Ganache over here but didn't trigger the explosive right away. They must have lured the security Amicus over to the generator room and placed it in shutdown mode there, then left the cat inside." Harold was terribly composed, even in the midst of crisis. "I imagine they expected someone would come in."

He was right—robots didn't usually keep up their "facades" if there weren't any humans around to interact with. Disregarding the Amicus who had been placed into shutdown mode, Ganache would have stopped moving if there weren't any humans in the generator room. It wouldn't move around until a human being walked in.

"So this means..." Echika said. She held her breath. "Their plan wasn't just to bomb the generator room, it was to get the bureau's people caught in the explosion, too?"

"Or perhaps... It pains me to consider this, but maybe they knew we would be the first to come here and planned to kill us at the same time as the power outage."

"There's no way they'd be able to predict that. It was only a coincidence that I found out what 'fireworks' meant."

"Was it, though?" Harold narrowed his eyes unpleasantly. "You wouldn't have figured it out if the man who attacked you in the hotel didn't mention it."

Echika felt goose bumps run through her skin.

"Are you saying...they manipulated me into coming here?" she asked.

"If E really is 'all-knowing,' it's possible." Harold looked frustrated. "My apologies. I should have been more cautious."

"It's not your fault. But who would try to kill us to begin with—?" Echika trailed off, breathing in smoke and breaking into a coughing fit. They couldn't

stay here. “Forget that. We need to get out of here.”

Panic settled in as she pushed on the door handle with both hands but it refused to budge. Harold tried to assist her, but Amicus didn’t have much strength to speak of.

As the model of robot closest to humankind, they were given grip and leg strength equivalent to that of the average person, for safety reasons, a few special cases notwithstanding. In other words, if Echika couldn’t open the door, neither could Harold. Worse still, they could damage the lever by pulling too hard and effectively seal themselves in.

“The fire department should have gotten an automatic alert when the fire started,” Harold said, his face clearly betraying concern. “I could just wait for rescue, but...that might not be an option for you.”

“It’d be dangerous for you, too,” Echika said, drawing her gun from its holster. “Get back.”

“What are you thinking?”

“If we can’t open this door, we’ll just have to remove it. I’ll use this to blow off the hinges. I’m not sure if it’ll work, but...”

Saying this, she hurriedly aimed and fired. But the place was dark, and smoke blanketed the air, further impeding visibility. She couldn’t even tell if she’d hit her mark. Just then, Echika felt her finger go numb. Her head throbbed. Her field of vision wavered and swayed.

“Echika?”

Before she knew it, her shoulder hit the wall, and she sank to the floor where she stood.

“Hang on!” Harold called out.

“I’m fine, don’t worry...”

She covered her mouth and nose with a hand, trying to keep herself from breathing in any more smoke. As she did, she used her Your Forma to call Chief Totoki, but she didn’t pick up. She then tried calling Investigator Fokin, but no luck there, either. Clinging on to even the slightest sliver of hope, she even tried

calling Benno—but he didn't answer, either.

Right. Everyone would be fighting off believers if they'd barged into HQ. It made sense they wouldn't pick up. Maybe she could send them a message, but...what would she even write? She couldn't think straight.

"I'll handle this somehow, so you stay low," Harold said, struggling to open the door.

Echika looked up at him vaguely, and then it dawned on her: His back, illuminated by the flames, was blackened and charred. The artificial skin around the nape of his neck was torn and damaged. The circuit board on his temperature-sensitive forced shutdown sensor was painful to look at.

This happened to him because he protected me.

Something Echika couldn't put into words suddenly rose in her heart. It was always, always like this. Harold always threw himself into danger for her. Even though he didn't really have any Laws of Respect to obey.

"Why didn't you say anything...?"

"What's wrong?"

Harold knelt to the floor to hear her better. Their gazes met. Unlike before, his eyes, as cold as frozen lakes, looked terribly alarmed. Or maybe that was only a performance of alarm.

"How are you all right?" She spoke clearly before her throat clenched up. "You're...hurt."

"This is nothing serious. Burns and smoke don't damage me much."

But still—*augh*, this was making her headache worse. A chilling concept came to mind: carbon monoxide poisoning. At this rate, she was going to...

"Keep your mouth shut, Echika. You're breathing in smoke."

Maybe it was the terrible situation, or perhaps her thoughts were simply grinding to a halt. Maybe it was because she was being exposed to the burning air; she couldn't tell. But whatever it was, it made waves of intense emotions overwhelm her. Something that had built up inside her in the days she'd spent away from him was about to burst.

What if we don't get rescued in time? What if I die here?

"Wait..."

Before she realized what she was doing, she grabbed Harold's arm as he made to get to his feet. The Amicus's eyes widened slightly, but that didn't matter right now—her presence of mind to keep up appearances was washed away in this situation.

She couldn't let things end like this.

"I'm sorry for saying that...", she said, coughing. "You were just...worried about me. And I pushed you away. I have to...apologize..."

"Now's not the time—"

"I hate myself." Her eyes felt hot, perhaps because of the smoke blowing against them. "It's only thanks to you that I let go of Matoi. And I thought...I was able to move forward. But maybe I was wrong. I felt like I was going back to the way I used to be. I lost faith in myself. I felt pathetic..."

Aaah, what am I saying?

This all must have sounded so incoherent to Harold. And yet...

"I understand now. I...I can manage just fine without you, too."

"I just told you, don't talk right now."

"But...but still, I can't help but...think about you... In the end, I'm the one who said we should be equals, and I was the one who didn't... I'm sorry, really..."

She choked up violently again and staggered. Harold's hands caught her shoulders. She thought he might have said something, but she couldn't hear him properly. Everything became hazy, except... Looking at it like this, she finally realized it.

I really am obsessing over this Amicus.

But there was no comparing this to what had happened with Matoi. There was a different hue to it all. She couldn't quite come up with an answer to what emotion this was. But if nothing else, she wasn't just keeping the secret for her own sake.

This just meant that all along she'd had the strength to protect someone she held dear. And even if doing so was incredibly wrong of her, this made her happy. It was a relief.

This wasn't just her ugly, filthy ego at play.

"Echika?"

The muddy darkness washed over everything. It was unbearably hot.

*

Echika grew visibly limp and stopped moving. She'd lost consciousness. Harold felt like his circuits might fry from fear. This was bad news. Carbon monoxide poisoning was lethal to humans.

He glanced at his wearable terminal; he'd been trying to contact Totoki for some time now, but to no avail. Then he looked back at Echika's pale eyelids. He doubted she would last even minutes in here.

They had underestimated E. They shouldn't have come here in the first place.

Again...

He wanted to grit his teeth.

Is this going to happen again?

His system's processing was being pressured.

It was like this when it happened to Sozon, too. I couldn't save him, just sit helplessly by as I watched his life run out. I can't make the same mistake again.

Harold had to open the door somehow. Even if he were to seek another way out, the flames coming from the generator room were approaching from down the corridor. This was an underground passage; there were no windows to be found.

And...there was no one watching him, either.

Harold made the decision at once. He laid Echika down on the floor and gently plucked the gun from her fingers. He knew how to use it. He'd seen how humans handled firearms countless times before.

But the moment he tightened his hold on its grip, his system let out a fierce alert.

<<Amicus possessing firearms is in violation of Article 10 of the International AI Operations Law / Disarm yourself immediately>>

His Laws of Respect didn't exist. But after a wave of Amicus-enabled weapons smuggling in the past, Amicus were made to receive an alert whenever they picked up any firearm. The signal traveled its way up his right hand's circuits, forcing his fingers to open. Harold used his left hand to keep them clenched.

Getting to his feet, he managed to undo the safety. Even in the smoke, his optical device could clearly define where the target he should aim at was. Meanwhile, his right hand was creaking as it started to thrash against his will. Overcome with annoyance, Harold connected to his system's source code. He had to turn off this restricting alert. What part should he overwrite to make it stop?

He was aware he was doing something wrong. If nothing else, he'd have to erase this memory, or encrypt it so that only he could see it. If anyone were to realize what he had done here, he'd be disposed of before he could take revenge for Sozon.

And yet...

He glanced at Echika. She lay on the ground unstirring, showing no signs of waking up.

I don't want to lose anyone anymore.

Why? Echika wasn't like Sozon. She wasn't family. She wasn't even the electronic investigator he needed anymore, either. Yet ultimately, he didn't want her to die. This impulse was terribly emotional and entirely detached from all rational thought. And at the same time, it wasn't simply his "conscience" at play, either. He wouldn't have considered rebelling against his own system if it were something as simple as that.

It dawned on him that his thoughts about Echika had been irrational for a while now.

"But...but still, I can't help but...think about you..."

It felt like something was about to break inside him.

He discovered the correct code in his system and instantly modified it. The resistance in his right hand vanished, and his fingers easily clamped around the gun. He regained his composure as if nothing had ever happened. This was good. Except... Later, he'd need to revert his code back to how it was originally.

Harold once again aimed at the door's hinges and pulled the trigger. A stronger recoil than he'd imagined passed through his hands. But one shot wasn't enough to completely blow the hinge off. Would a shotgun have done it? He recalled seeing a military-grade shotgun in a movie before.

He pulled the trigger again. His system's processing unit lasered in on that one singular point. At one point, a bullet ricocheted and went flying in a random direction.

After shooting out the third hinge, Harold realized he'd emptied out the gun's clip. He touched the now loose door, which wobbled ever so slightly at his touch. He then rammed his shoulder into it with all the force he could muster, trying to push it open, but it wasn't enough. He gathered every ounce of strength he had and pushed it again.

As he repeated this over and over again, the door finally came completely loose, sliding off and hitting the floor with a cacophonous thud. The smoke filling the air rushed out of the corridor at once, and the object that had been holding the lever in place came into view.

It was a cart for loading in packages. The cardboard boxes loaded onto it were stacked so as to just barely reach the lever. These were probably stored in the warehouse. Each box didn't weigh much on its own, but their weight became considerable when put together. Someone had undoubtedly carried it in using the loading elevator around the time of the blast. But he could figure that out later.

Harold tossed Echika's pistol right into the flames. He felt guilt over doing this to her, but he couldn't risk someone checking how many bullets her pistol had left and piecing together that he'd fired it.

The Amicus pushed the cart away and picked up Echika's limp body in his arms. Her slender form was terribly light. Confirming that she was still

breathing, he immediately fled from the corridor. Upon climbing the stairs, he could feel his auditory sensors being blotted out by overlapping shouts.

These voices probably belonged to the believers. Still, he couldn't very well go outside. Just as Harold carefully pushed the door to the staircase open—

“Are you two all right?!”

Someone pulled open the door from outside. Harold jerked back reflexively, but the figure that appeared there was that of a familiar Russian man—Investigator Fokin from the Investigation Support Department. His right hand was injured, and even through the dark, Harold could clearly tell it was bleeding. He awkwardly clutched his pistol in his left hand.

Right, Echika must have contacted him. She'd either relayed her position to him or asked Totoki for help, in which case, Totoki must have then gone on to share Echika's positional data with Fokin. Harold couldn't tell which it was, but either way, they were safe now.

“She needs treatment as soon as possible. She's unconscious.”

“Yeah.” Fokin seemed shaken up, his mouth hanging open and closing a few times as he took in Echika's limp, unconscious form. “We have an ambulance out back. I'll cover for you, so you take her there.”

“What about Chief Totoki?”

“She's fine, but the followers are blocking her way, so she couldn't get here.” He glanced behind him. “Stay close to me. And don't drop her, no matter what.”

“Of course.”

Fokin gestured for him to go, and Harold followed him down the hall. The lights were off because of the power outage, but that didn't impede his vision in the slightest. They would have to pass by the entrance to reach the back door.

Several dozen believers had forced their way in to clash with police investigators. Rocks flew in the air as the believers continued their charge in, unflinching in the face of the tear gas sprayed their way. Warning shots shook the air. The moonlight spilling in from the skylight shone down on the injured

lying on the floor.

It was truly a disaster.

Harold tightened his hold on Echika. As they safely made it out through the back door, a cold, clean night breeze blew against them. Past the blue warning lights of the ambulances, large fireworks shot up and bloomed in the night sky with low, distant thuds.

But the way they scattered like cinders didn't strike Harold as beautiful; it only came across as oddly repulsive.

4

“How’s Uncle Danel doing, Bigga?”

“He hasn’t woken up yet. The doctors said it should happen any day now, but...”

Inside a phone booth at Oslo University Hospital, Bigga called Lie on a tablet. The screen that was attached to the landline phone in her home in Kautokeino was blacked out.

“I’ll try to go over there soon, like we planned. So don’t worry.”

“Thanks, Clara.”

Her cousin’s kind voice helped Bigga relax ever so slightly. Having Lie here would be more encouraging than anything else. After Echika left for France, Bigga had needed to spend the last two days alone in the hospital watching over her father. The anxiety was starting to get the better of her.

Bigga hung up and left the booth. She saw a man approach from the other end of the hall and couldn’t help but grimace. It was Investigator Sedov, with his large build and distinctive stubble.

“Good morning, Bigga. Did you sleep well last night?”

“Yes,” she lied. Between her concerns for her father and the hospital room’s hard sofa, she hadn’t gotten a wink of sleep. “Hmm, have there been any developments? How’s the interrogation of those two men going...?”

“Nothing new. They keep saying they just assumed E’s name,” Sedov said,

looking displeased. “I was hoping to speak to Danel. Is he conscious?”

“...Not yet.”

“Right. Guess I’ll just take a look at him and head back, then.”

He strode through the hospital wing with large strides as Bigga trotted behind him with small steps. Sedov came to check on Danel like this every day. Not out of sympathy, of course, but to observe him.

“Investigator Sedov,” Bigga asked his large back. “Has Miss Hieda contacted you?”

“You haven’t heard?” Sedov turned to look at her suspiciously. *Heard what?* “E’s followers attacked HQ last night. A fire broke out, and it attracted a lot of media attention.”

Bigga stopped in her tracks, stunned. She hadn’t checked the news this morning yet. She hurriedly turned on her tablet and called up a news app, and a headline immediately popped up:

<Lyon, France / E followers stage attack on Interpol, over fifty injured, one in critical condition>

What is this?!

“Hieda and Fokin are both fine,” Sedov reassured her calmly. “Most of the injured are from the believers’ side, but a few of the bureau’s people got hurt, too. One’s in bad shape. The facilities got pretty badly damaged, too.”

Sedov continued walking as he spoke. Bigga followed. Echika was safe, but what about Harold? She’d heard he was in France with the pretty electronic investigator, too. Sedov replied curtly when she asked about him.

“I wouldn’t know about that. Unlike the humans, the security Amicus apparently took a lot of damage, though.”

“But he’s an investigator aide Amicus, a custom model...”

As they talked, the two of them arrived at the hospital room. The moment Sedov opened the sliding door, all the thoughts that had bothered her so far were blown away.

Because her father, who'd been lying unstirring on the bed earlier, had cracked his eyes open.

"...Bigga?"

Aaah...

She pushed Sedov out of the way and hurried into the room.

*

The terrace of the general hospital in southern Lyon offered a beautiful view. You could see the buses running along the road from there, of course, but also the red-brickwork houses and the green sloping hills in the distance.

Sitting on the bench, Echika took a deep breath. The light burns in her throat stung as she inhaled the warm, dry breeze. She'd fallen unconscious for a bit but seemed to have gotten away largely unscathed, thanks to Harold and Fokin rushing her to an ambulance. Her symptoms of carbon monoxide poisoning were medium in severity, so she'd only needed to breathe in concentrated oxygen and have her burns treated.

"Either way, you're resting today," Investigator Fokin, who was sitting in front of her, said like he was reading her thoughts.

He hadn't slept a wink and was simply standing in place, staring into thin air with exhaustion. He was using his Your Forma. A believer had slashed at him during the attack and seriously injured his right hand, which was now bound with suture tape. He wouldn't be using it anytime soon.

"I'll head back to HQ, too. I think you'll have trouble working without your good hand."

"Worry about yourself right now." He brushed her offer away decisively. "We got you a room in the hospital, so stay here for the day. Leave the investigation to me and Totoki."

"But..."

"Look, I'm saying you don't have to handle the chief when she's in *this state of mind*. Count yourself lucky."

Echika couldn't bring herself to laugh at his joke, and Fokin himself was frowning. *This state of mind*—he was referring to Totoki's awful reaction to discovering Ganache had been blown apart. She'd backed up its data, but that didn't change the fact that her pet cat had met a gruesome end.

"Hmm." Echika only managed to say this after a moment's thought. "Give the chief my regards."

Fokin simply shrugged—she'd realized recently that this was probably a quirk of his—and raised his tape-covered right hand to wave good-bye. As he left the terrace, she saw an Amicus pass him by and enter. Echika widened her eyes.

Harold.

His gaze met Echika's, and he smiled. It wasn't his perfect, fake smile but a natural expression born of relief. He headed straight toward her. He'd discarded his jacket, which had been singed in the explosion, and instead wore a clean shirt. She was sure he'd gone to the repair shop, but here he was.

"How are you doing?"

"I'm all better now... How about you? Are you hurt?"

"I went through emergency repairs."

Saying this, Harold took a seat next to her. His neck had a bandage meant for humans wrapped around it. This probably served to protect his exposed circuit board, but...

"Just go get yourself fixed already," Echika told him.

"I'm planning to, of course. But I wanted to check on you first."

"I see," Echika said, momentarily stumped for what to say next. "As you can see, I'm doing well. Thanks to you saving me."

"The credit goes to Investigator Fokin. You might not have been so lucky if he hadn't shown up." Harold looked in the direction where Fokin had walked off.

"Should I buy him a nice *tarte aux pralines* after this?"

"I'll chip in."

Soft rays of sunlight spilled over the Japanese garden set up in the terrace's

corner. Artificial autumn leaves and the white pavement vividly reflected the rays, producing a dazzling display of light. Despite that, Echika swore she could still smell the scent of smoke lurking in her nostrils.

“I’m honestly glad I saved you,” he whispered like he was muttering to himself. “If anything had happened to you, I’d never stop blaming myself for it.”

“That...feels like you’re exaggerating,” Echika replied.

But Echika, too, was relieved to see that Harold hadn’t died. She was, but... Now that she’d avoided mortal danger, she couldn’t put those emotions into words as easily as she had in the heat of the moment. Even she found herself exasperating sometimes.

“So, um, what happened to the believers that attacked the bureau?”

“Mostly rounded up and arrested, save for the injured ones. A few of them are on the run, but we have their Your Forma GPS positions, so they can only get so far.”

A night had passed since the attack. Apparently, nearly eighty believers had assaulted the Interpol headquarters. Most of them had mingled with the spectators for the fireworks, like Echika had predicted, and kept knives and projectiles hidden on their persons.

The incident had ended with only injuries and no casualties, thanks to Totoki’s and the other senior investigators’ quick thinking, but two investigators had been heavily injured. One of them was in critical condition from multiple stab wounds. It was possible they would receive bad news about their fate in the coming days.

On the bright side, the believers were otherwise arrested on the spot, and none of them reached the vault. At least, that was the official statement. But...

“It would be rash of us to assume we protected the information,” Harold said. “You may have forgotten, but *E’s believers infiltrated the bureau.*”

Right—someone carried Ganache, who’d been rigged with explosives, into the generator room. Someone who knew the plan about the “fireworks” and had been able to alter Ganache with Totoki none the wiser.

“And that spy planned to cause the power outage so the believers could make it in.”

“We found posts hinting at the plan in the followers’ message boards. ‘Fireworks’ had been a code name taking advantage of the Bastille Day celebrations from the start.” Harold opened a holo-browser with his terminal and showed her the screen. “The attacks on the investigators’ lodgings were also supposed to be a diversion.”

“Yeah, I imagine.” With all that going on, Totoki and the higher-ups had been too occupied with the assaults to pay Ganache’s disappearance any mind. “Isn’t there any record of who took Ganache away?”

“No, it seems the security camera footage was all wiped during the power outage.”

“So no luck there...”

“That aside, the spy who took Ganache away was trying to kill me above all else.” He closed the browser. “The emergency door was intentionally sealed, so I’m sure of it.”

Echika raised an eyebrow. Trying to kill *him*?

“They weren’t just trying to kill you, they were going for me, too.”

“Yes, but I’m sure I’m the one they were after. I must know something that’s bad for E.”

Really...? Echika relaxed her knit brows. She leaned forward from the back of the bench. “So you’re saying...you already know who the mole is.”

The smile vanished from Harold’s lips.

“Yes.” His fair lips replied quietly. “But that said, I’m still in the dark about E’s identity.”

“I think I probably know their identity,” Echika said.

Harold gazed at her in silent amazement. This was, of course, fact and not some kind of bluff...at least, assuming her hypothesis wasn’t off the mark.

Echika gave the Amicus her theory.

“I see,” Harold said with a somewhat doubtful look on his face. “If what you say is true, yes, it all does fit into place.”

“I’m not sure what ‘all’ you’re talking about, but either way...”

“If you’re willing to ask, I’d be willing to tell you everything. Including, of course, the possible identity of the spy.”

Echika found herself gazing at his face. Harold looked back at her earnestly, without so much as a hint of teasing to his eyes. His pupils, like frozen lakes, resembled cold glass. Perfect eyes, completely lacking in warmth. And yet it seemed as though an incomplete heart was beating behind them.

“Echika. I promised that I would strive to be your equal.” His blond hair looked washed out in the soft sunlight. “I’ll never use you ever again. Never. So I want you to listen to me. And, if possible, I would like us to cooperate like we did in the past.”

Harold spoke calmly, but his words somehow felt like an oath. Echika couldn’t mask her surprise. Indeed, he’d promised he would try to grow closer to her as a human. And she did feel that he was treating her less and less like a pawn in a game. But today was the first time Harold had told her as much to her face.

Aaah, she couldn’t quite put it into words, but...she was almost certainly pleased. If nothing else, she would have been even happier if he’d told this to her at any other time.

“Of course...I want to hear your theory, and I’m willing to cooperate. Except —”

Echika tensed up, self-conscious about her mixed emotions showing on her face. She hadn’t used the cartridge yet that day. She had to be careful, or he would read her heart.

“Except what?”

“I’m not sure if what you said applies anymore,” Echika said, her words coming across as evasive. But she had to put it that way; otherwise, she felt like he would have to shoulder an unnecessary responsibility. “What I’m trying to say is, I’m not your partner anymore. That promise of being equals probably won’t mean much if we don’t work together... But I am happy you feel that

way.”

She could tell Harold was furrowing his brow, but she carried on anyway.

“What I’m trying to say is, you should be telling this to Investigator Robin, not me. I realize this might be meddling where I don’t belong, but...”

“Yes, you very much are meddling.”

“I didn’t mean to offend, um...”

“Why do you have to be so stubborn after you tell me things like ‘I can’t help but think about you?’” he asked her, a bit upset.

Echika’s mind blanked out for a moment. Harold perhaps realized she would try to reflexively run away, because he reached out and grabbed her by the arm before she got to her feet. His grasp was rather firm.

This is the worst.

Yes, she had blurted that out back then.

“But...but still, I can’t help but...think about you...”

Why hadn’t she considered he could tease her over that after the fact?

“Now, that was just, I said that in the heat of the moment,” Echika said, totally flustered. “I mean, I thought we were going to die, and, you know, it was a figure of speech... And it’s not like I said you were the *only thing* on my mind or anything! Though, I did say I was thinking *about* you...”

“I don’t think there’s a big difference.”

“There’s a *huge* difference.”

“Echika, are you incapable of being honest unless your life is on the line?”

“I only told you that because I thought you needed to hear it. Plus, I told you to stop calling me by my first name.”

“Well, just so you know, I kept thinking about you, too.”

Huh?

Echika’s expression must have turned stupefied. Harold’s expression, however, remained as earnest and composed as ever. He didn’t appear to have

said it as a joke, nor was he wearing his usual smile. He was terribly serious.

“Liza is talented, and as an electronic investigator, she’s without fault. But I always find myself thinking back to you whenever I investigate with her.”

Echika couldn’t even blink.

“The other day, Liza wanted to show me around Lyon, so we went to the Roman theater together,” he continued as if carried away, though it wasn’t clear if he realized it or not. “And I felt a sense of unease the whole time. It made me realize that things just aren’t right if I don’t have you by my side. I can’t quite explain it, but it made me restless in a way that’s different from the unease I told you about in the past.”

“Wait,” Echika managed to chime in. “Do you...have any idea what you’re saying here?”

“Yes,” Harold replied, casting her a doubtful look. “I’m verbalizing it, so I must understand what I’m saying.”

It was so sudden she couldn’t believe him; there must have been some angle to this attitude of his. At any rate, that was how things had always been; that he was actually teasing her whenever he pretended to get serious about these things.

“Listen to me. Don’t try to make a fool out of me, okay?” Echika said.

“Perish the thought. I’m not trying to do that at all.”

“As if,” Echika said, shaking his hand off her arm. “Anyway, I want to hear your theory—”

“Are you trying to say I’m acting abnormally?” Harold refused to back down. “I understand what you mean perfectly well. I can tell there’s a problem in my emotional engine. But since it’s not outputting any errors, this must mean this is some kind of emotion that’s been placed within me but has never been put to use until now.”

“You don’t have any idea what you’re saying here.”

The sunlight continued to prickle at her, knowing no rest. Her spine felt unbearably hot for some reason. *What is this? What in the world is this?*

“You’re a special human being, Echika.” Harold’s tone was as calm as it was clear. “I always saw humans as ‘living beings who accept that which they can both understand and is safe to them.’ In other words, the reason many of you love Amicus is because they are humanlike but lack an intellect that can exceed the human mind.”

Harold appended that compared to them, he wasn’t anything quite so nice.

“But even knowing this, you didn’t reject me. No, pardon. You not rejecting me was within my expectations.”

“I figured. You wouldn’t have showed me your true self if you didn’t feel that way.”

“Yes. But you saying you wanted to be my equal... I could have never foreseen that. Being treated as equal to a human is of no importance whatsoever to me, after all. Yet hearing you say you wanted it made me willing to try.”

“...Yeah.”

“I believe I have developed an interest in you. As a presence in my life.”

It was without a doubt Harold’s “mechanical” side speaking to her right now. Not the Amicus who, despite realizing his Laws of Respect didn’t exist, still pretended to be human so he could be accepted. No, he was speaking to Echika with his nature laid bare, without any trappings of pretending to be human.

He trusted her more than she expected.

Despite the fact that she was no longer an electronic investigator, he still wished to remain involved with her. Was that a product of his intellectual curiosity as a machine? Echika honestly couldn’t tell.

“And what about you?” The Amicus’s eyes were almost beautifully calm. “Why were you thinking about me?”

How was she going to answer that question?

At first, Echika had believed she only clung to him because she wanted someone who would be kind to her. But it turned out to be more than just that. Why was she so drawn to this Amicus? There were so many things she didn’t understand, so many ways this had hurt her. But she wished to be his equal in

spite of it all.

She harbored this grave secret for him.

“That’s because...”

Echika averted her eyes, as if the wind had snatched away her gaze. The rooftops of the houses on the sloping hills were beginning to lose their color. Thin clouds hung over the sky, blocking the sunlight.

“I think it’s not all that different from you.”

She felt Harold’s gaze prickles against her temple.

“Meaning?” he asked.

“I can get people if I Dive into their minds.” She couldn’t Brain Dive now, but she had been able to until just recently. “But I can’t do that with you. You’re a huge black box, full of things I can’t comprehend. Sometimes you’re too mechanical, other times you’re too human, and I just can’t get a handle on what you are... So you draw my interest.”

He drew her interest. That wasn’t a lie, there was no doubting that...but that wasn’t all there was to it, either. She couldn’t find the right way to phrase it at the moment.

“I think I’ve told you this before, but...,” Harold said, looking a bit surprised. “Given how much you used to hate Amicus, you’ve really changed.”

“That doesn’t mean I’m interested in Amicus now,” Echika said, turning her eyes back to Harold. “I just probably...only care when it’s you. An RF Model is different from most Amicus. You’re special, right?”

The Amicus furrowed his brow slightly.

“Yes, of course,” he said.

“Right. So...yeah, I think that’s what I mean.”

Echika could only nod awkwardly. Seeing this, Harold suddenly smiled. His soft grin didn’t come across as teasing—only kind.

“To be honest, I was waiting for you at the hotel so we could have this conversation,” he said with his usual gentle tone. “What I wanted to tell you

was that even if we aren't partners, I am your friend... And as your friend, I want to strive to be your equal."

Her friend.

She wasn't used to hearing that word. It felt ticklish, somehow.

"Um... Thank you. I feel the same way," Echika said, rubbing her heels against the ground out of awkwardness. "Then... Um, I'm not really sure what to say, but...I hope we can keep getting along."

"Me too." Harold deepened his smile joyously. "Then why don't we shake on it?"

"I mean, it's not like we were fighting or anything."

"Understood. Let's hug on it, then."

"No, that's taking it too far."

Harold looked terribly stung at her immediate reaction...but she knew even this was calculated.

Geez, we were discussing something serious just a minute ago. Talk about slick.

"I just want to express my affection for you as a friend," he said.

"I understand, but you're being too touchy-feely about it."

"Compared to how the French give pecks on the cheek, a hug doesn't seem that excessive."

"Didn't we start with a handshake?"

"So you'd be willing to settle for a handshake, then? Thank you."

No, I never said that.

But before she could protest, Harold gripped her hand.

Fine, just do whatever...

Resigning herself to his whims, Echika could only watch her hand wave up and down as he shook it.

I guess maybe this isn't too bad, sometimes...

“By the way...I’m still waiting to hear your hypothesis. Could you tell me?” Echika asked.

“Yes.” Harold let go of her hand, like he’d just remembered his promise. “It’ll probably take a while to fully explain.”

And so Harold began telling her. It didn’t take as long as he said, though. His theory was well-reasoned and cogent, and he relayed it calmly and concisely.

Echika wasn’t sure what her face must have looked like when he finished the explanation. She felt very much taken aback.

“Don’t take this as me doubting you, but are you sure about this?” she asked.

“Unquestionably,” he asserted. “But there are some pieces missing in this theory.”

“Like what?” She couldn’t tell what Harold meant. “It feels perfectly coherent to me.”

“No, there’s one thing missing. The matter of your *data processing abilities declining*.”

Echika forgot to breathe for a moment.

What?

“What do you mean?” Her tongue felt as though it might cling to the roof of her mouth. “That happened because of emotional, mental issues...”

“I thought so, too, at first. But if that’s the case, the theory falls apart,” Harold said, his expression turning pensive again. “Do you really have no idea what might have caused it?”

“If I did, I’d have done something about it by now.”

“There must be something, Echika. Please, you have to remember what it is.”

She suspected an outside factor might have been involved, too, at first, of course. Even if she did feel stress, the medical cartridges would have taken care of it. But she hadn’t experienced any emotional strain. Just then, Echika felt her stomach flip.

Right.

Bigga's father had realized his daughter was a civilian cooperator. Not only that, but he also knew what Echika looked like. And he had booked a flight for Lyon.

It couldn't be.

"Tell me, please." Harold likely realized something from the way the color drained from her face. "Just what—?"

All of a sudden, she got a call on her Your Forma. It was so unexpected that Echika shuddered. What bad timing. Patting down the left side of her chest, she checked the pop-up window.

And then her heart skipped a beat again.

<Audio call from Bigga>

"...Give me...a minute."

Echika saw Harold jerk his chin and calmed herself enough to take the call.

"Miss Hieda?" Bigga's voice was audibly shaking. **"My father woke up just now."**

Echika thought she could hear the girl clench her teeth.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, I didn't know." She was sobbing. **"It was him. My father was the one who took away your Brain Diving capabilities...! He modified the cartridges I sent you. Your—"**

Echika didn't remember how she responded. Once again, everything had been a setup.

Once she hung up, Echika realized she had gotten to her feet. It felt like her knees might buckle under her weight. Harold, who had been waiting for her to finish the call, stood as well.

"I see we have our missing piece."

"Call the chief, right now." The nails of her clenched fist dug into her palm. "Aide Lucraft, you act according to the operation. You have something in mind this time, too, right?"

"Oh. You're leaving it to my discretion?"

“If anything, you should be at the heart of it. *So long as you are, E can’t predict our next move.*”

The faint clouds scattered, casting rays of sharp sunlight. Both of their shadows were projected vividly onto the terrace.

“I’ll be glad to give you my suggestions, then, *Electronic Investigator Hieda.*”

YOUR FORMA

Chapter 4
Dream of
the Crowd



Chapter 4

Dream of the Crowd

1

“Hello, Bigga? I just got your package.”

“Oh, good. I was worried you wouldn’t get it in time.”

Interpol headquarters. Two nights had passed since the attack, and its marks were still perceptible. The entrance, where investigators and believers had clashed, was still swarming with analysis ants, and repairs to the incinerated generator room were ongoing.

Being careful not to trip over the external generators set up here and there, Echika ascended the stairs. Sadly, the elevators were all out of service, so she had to reach the upper floors on foot.

“Is it safe to insert this into my connection port?”

She carried a package in her arms, which she’d just picked up from the distribution management room. Through the opening on its seal, she could see medical HSB cartridges sitting inside some cushioning.

“Yes. It should normalize the neurotransmitter activity that interfered with your data processing abilities.” Bigga’s voice was clear. **“But you should still go to the hospital within the next few days. We can’t afford anything else happening to you.”**

“Understood. Oh, and I wanted to ask you something.”

Bigga answered Echika’s question morosely—she was greatly dispirited, since she felt responsible for what had happened, but her answer gave Echika the conviction she needed.

“Thank you. Either way, you were a huge help.”

“This is all I can do, but I’m praying everything goes well.”

“Yeah.” Echika nodded and then appended her statement after a moment’s thought. “This wasn’t your fault, Bigga. I know telling you to not let it weigh on you might be asking for the impossible... But don’t torment yourself too much over it.”

Echika couldn’t tell what Bigga was thinking, but the other girl fell silent for a moment. Then she took a deep breath and said in a terribly careful, fragile manner:

“I’ll tell him. I’ll tell Dad how I feel.”

Echika imagined resolve burning in her green eyes.

Bigga hung up. Echika left the fourth-floor stairwell and entered the Electrocime Investigations Bureau office. Familiar investigators were busy at their desks. Benno was there, a bandage plastered over his cheek to cover an injury he’d sustained in the attack. Sitting with him were the members of the Investigation Support Department and the Web Surveillance Department.

“Hieda.” Investigator Fokin approached her. “Aide Lucraft just left.”

“All right. I got it right on time, too.”

Echika placed the package on the desk and took out a cartridge. As she inserted it into the connection port in the back of her neck, Fokin exhaled through his nose, a mixed expression on his face.

“I’m sorry to see you go,” he said. “I thought we had a good thing going.”

“Me too,” Echika replied. Those were her honest feelings. “It was a valuable experience.”

“Same here.” He gave a somewhat sheepish grin. “Now then, our job’s not over quite yet.”

Fokin gave Echika a friendly tap on the back as she corrected her posture. Her eyes met Chief Totoki’s, who was standing under the screen. She motioned for Echika to approach, so she got up and walked over.

“I see you got the package.” Totoki glanced at the back of Echika’s neck. “I honestly don’t know whether this will make you happier anymore.”

“I’m hoping this is for the best.”

“Yes... Right. Let’s give it our A game, shall we?”

Echika and Totoki both moved their gazes to the screen. Just like the other day, a post from E was displayed in the center.

[Do not allow the Electrocrime Investigations Bureau to get away with harming our brave comrades.

The investigators hold the truth of the sensory crime incident. Exact revenge. Exact revenge. Exact revenge.]

Posted by E / 1 hour ago

E’s latest post followed up from the attack two days before, and it was another provocative one. The upload went on to list the names of individual investigators affiliated with the Electrocrime Investigations Bureau, as well as their personal weaknesses—family members, in most cases. But unlike previous posts, this one included the names of investigators who’d already been targeted before. Among them was Liza.

[Liza Germain Robin.

Lives in an apartment on Pierre Scize Street. Her beloved brother is locked away.]

“What about the followers, Chief Totoki?”

“They seem to be gearing up to join in, but since Lyon has been on high alert for the last two days, they’ll likely have trouble moving around. That’s why this operation can work.” Totoki touched her done-up hair. “Now listen up. The top brass is only going along with an absurd play like this once.”

Echika fell silent and jerked her chin. The attack had left two of the bureau's agents injured, with one in critical condition, so the higher-ups had concluded they couldn't afford to stand by and watch any longer. They wanted to wrap this case up as soon as possible, and Echika felt the same way.

But there was a subtle difference in their lines of thought.

Come to think of it, the bureau had tried to obscure the truth to begin with. Of course, they couldn't very well tolerate the crimes the followers had committed, but...

Echika got a message notification from her Your Forma, as if to wipe away her doubts.

"Investigator Fokin and I should be going out right about now," she said.

"Don't let your guard down, no matter what. I hope you'll manage to persuade them."

Echika parted ways with Totoki and walked out of the office with Fokin.

"As you can see, I won't be of much help on the scene," he said, touching his bandaged right hand. "I'll be counting on you to pull both our weights in a fight."

"If all goes to plan, hopefully I won't have to."

Echika checked that her new Flamma 15 handgun was in her ankle holster. She then removed the cartridge from the port in the nape of her neck. Her head felt clear—crystal clear—like a fog hanging over her head had just lifted.

*

E's followers started to appear on Pierre Scize Street following E's post. They must have gone out to attack Liza. Harold watched, from a Volvo parked on the road, as patrolling investigators called out to them.

In the end, all the believers really wanted was a reason. They were waiting for someone, anyone, to light a match to ignite their latent anger. But in their heart of hearts, even that justification, or E themselves, may as well have not existed.

Liza left her building before long, visibly pale. Upon spotting Harold in the

Volvo, she widened her eyes in surprise, but even that gesture looked terribly limp and feeble. He lowered the window, and she approached him.

“What are you doing here, Harold...?”

“I thought you’d be in danger on your own, so I came to pick you up.” He casually cocked his head toward the passenger seat. “Have you seen E’s latest post?”

“Yes,” she said, her cheeks stiff. “Looks like I’m a target now.”

“Why don’t you get in for now?”

Liza nodded anxiously and obediently entered the vehicle. She was dressed in a bulky jacket and had a bag sitting on her lap. Suddenly, she fixed her gaze on the holo-browser window open on Harold’s wearable terminal.

“...Don’t tell me there was another assault.”

“Not yet, for now. Thankfully, the Lyon police are on active patrol after what happened two days ago.”

“I see,” Liza said, biting her lips, which were devoid of her usual lipstick. “...I’m worried for my brother.”

“Where is the medical facility he’s staying in?”

“In Limonest. It’s a good distance from here,” she said, restlessly scratching her hair. “It’s a small town, so I doubt the believers would go all the way there, but on the off chance they do...”

“Yes, it’s possible they would. Let’s go check on him.”

“You’d come with me?”

“Things being what they are right now, I’m sure Chief Totoki will understand.”

Harold opened the map right away. Liza clenched her slender fingers and extended her hand after a moment’s hesitation, inputting the medical facility’s address in the holo-browser. It was a thirty-minute drive away.

“By the way, Liza, how are you feeling?”

“A bit dizzy, but that’s all. It’s probably just a little cold.”

Or so she said, but she didn't have the presence of mind to even manage a smile.

Limonest was a community located in a hilly region twelve kilometers from Lyon. The Volvo Harold and Liza were in sped along the highway according to their route. Commerce facilities resembling warehouses whizzed past them along the road, and they could see little through the windshield besides the sky ahead. The pair spotted a few police cars on patrol, but compared to the officers in Lyon, they seemed to be going about their business calmly. There were hardly any pedestrians in sight, to say nothing of believers.

"It's a quiet town. A very nice place," Harold remarked.

"Yes," Liza replied from the passenger's seat, her eyes turned to the window. "There are some proper tourist attractions, though. Like a chocolate museum..."

"Have you visited it?"

"Once, with my brother."

Eventually the road split, and the Volvo began climbing a gentle hill. The road narrowed, and they drove toward some classic-style houses. The number of buildings continued thinning out, and once the area grew thick with trees, they finally reached their destination.

The *La Riviere* recuperation facility sat snugly halfway up a hill. It was a modern, round building that didn't quite match its pastoral surroundings. Its premises were deceptively vast, and according to the map, there were a reservoir and a church nearby.

They left the Volvo in the facility's deserted parking lot. They hadn't seen hide nor hair of followers so far. Harold got out of the car with Liza and entered the main building. Past the security gate was the main office, where Liza talked things over with a human clerk. The fact that a person and not an Amicus was filling this role was quite unusual.

Harold paid it little mind as he clicked on his terminal and looked around the entrance. A statue of an angel stood in the center of the floor. He read the

words written on the plinth.

“Donated by the Electrocime Investigations Bureau of Interpol HQ.”

It seemed this facility had been specifically established to accommodate electronic investigators and investigator aides who had broken down. That, or the bureau at least helped manage the place. Like Totoki had said before, being an electronic investigator or an aide was fundamentally dangerous work. In that light, you could claim facilities like these were a necessity.

But then again, Harold had never heard of these “receptacle” facilities before.

“They said my brother is fine.” Liza had come back to Harold. “A nurse Amicus just took his temperature earlier. I guess the believers didn’t come this far after all.”

“That’s good,” Harold said, smiling. “Do you want to go and check in on him?”

“Yes, I should pay him a visit,” she replied, still looking dizzy and bringing a hand to her forehead. “I’ll be done in a few minutes. Could you wait here?”

“You aren’t looking very good right now. Let me come with you.”

“Really, I’m fine. It’s nothing...,” Liza said, gently refusing. Then she walked into the facility.

A young woman in a wheelchair came through the entrance and passed them. A middle-aged man who must have been her father was speaking to her as he pushed her along. His daughter replied to him in a murmur, her expression blank.

Harold couldn’t tell if this was an electronic investigator or an aide, but he felt his system creak slightly.

Humans shouldn’t have been trying to imitate machines in the first place.

Just as Amicus couldn’t truly imitate humans.

That thought suddenly crossed Harold’s mind. Then he took off after Liza without a moment’s hesitation. The facility’s passages became corridors, which opened onto a central courtyard the patients’ rooms were centered around. He spotted Liza just as she entered one of the rooms. Harold stood in front of the half-open sliding door. The aroma of citrus stimulated his scent sensors—her

home smelled exactly like this.

“How are you doing, Hugues?” Liza asked, her voice gentle.

The room wasn't so much a sickroom as a living room. The walls and floors were painted a comforting shade of ivory, and it was equipped with furnishings like a desk and sofa. Faint light streamed into the room from the window facing the central courtyard.

A young man sitting on the bed came into view. He was in the middle of a meal; a nurse Amicus was cutting a baguette into small slices, which it proceeded to carry to his mouth. The young man didn't budge, though, making no attempt to eat it.

“I'm sorry for coming in while he's eating,” Liza said.

“Not at all,” the nurse Amicus replied. “But he doesn't have much of an appetite today.”

Hugues's features were fair and resembled his younger sister's. But his complexion was poor, and his lips were terribly dry. His eyes were unfocused, and though his hair was clean and well kempt, the nails of his exposed feet were cracked and broken.

Harold frowned gently. So this was an electronic investigator who had gone through ego muddling. He looked...no different from a deactivated Amicus.

“Give me a second, Hugues. I'll feed you.”

Liza gave her brother a peck on the cheek and moved to the desk. It had an old desktop setup, which you didn't see often in this day and age. It had a big curved monitor, and the PC itself was large and robust. It must have had high specs, but it sure looked out of fashion.

The nurse Amicus left the tray that had been on its knees on the desk. It seemed willing to leave Liza to handle this. The Amicus gave a few parting words, then walked over in Harold's direction. It noticed him but didn't seem to pay his presence much mind.

Harold pondered over how much of Liza's sorrow he ought to share in. In all likelihood, the very act of trying to sympathize was irrational.

“Liza.” Harold entered the room and closed the door behind him.

Liza looked up, startled. For a moment, her cheeks stiffened. But the next instant, her expression quickly changed to that of a confused smile.

“I told you to wait, Harold...”

“I’m sorry. I was worried about you.”

He glanced at Hugues; the man was propped up in bed, staring into thin air like before. It seemed like he wasn’t even acknowledging their presence.

“Sorry, I’ll be done soon,” Liza said.

She started tapping away at the keyboard in a panic. Her polished nails touched the keys, producing a pleasant clacking sound.

“That’s a pretty fancy PC. Is it your brother’s?”

“Yes, he used to dabble with computers like this as a hobby... Some of his friends still send him e-mails, so I reply to them.”

“Shouldn’t you use an automatic reply app for that, like with the Your Forma?”

“He didn’t like things like that, so I write on his behalf.”

“I see... Yes, an app would make that difficult. It wouldn’t be able to compose texts as theatrical as E’s, after all.”

The sound of her typing ceased abruptly.

“You must have wanted to stop the believers before they made a target out of your brother, yes?” Harold held up his terminal’s holo-browser. “Except...I don’t think wording it like this would convince them.”

The browser was opened to a thread on a very familiar message board.

[A warning, comrades. The Electocrime Investigations Bureau is lying in wait to ambush us at every turn.

Suspend your attempts at retribution one and all and await further orders. Await the next post.]

“...What are you talking about?” Liza asked, her expression stiff. She was frowning, like she couldn’t understand his accusation. “There was a new post? Don’t take it seriously. If E came up with it, there must be some other—”

“Show me your monitor, Liza.”

A splitting silence hung between them. The thread displayed in his holo-browser window kept auto-refreshing and calling up new posts, spelling out the believers’ confusion.

[After they hurt so many of our people?]

[You’re the one who told us to take revenge.]

[We have a just cause to fight for.]

[Who cares if they’re trying to ambush us?]

[I was against this at first, too. Let’s just stop.]

[This doesn’t feel like an E post. Another phony, after all this time?]

[Keep your mouth shut, impostor.]

“I have to apologize to you about something.” Harold closed the browser. “*I’m the one who wrote* the E post targeting your brother this morning.”

Yes—the uploads imploring the believers to “*not allow the Electrocrime Investigations Bureau to get away with harming our brave comrades*” had actually been penned by Harold. He’d intentionally leaked the investigators’ private information under the bureau’s approval and supervision.

Liza bit her lip. Harold could tell she was acting. “...Is this a joke?”

“No.” It was the truth. “Apparently, E had a number of imitators when it first showed up. But these people soon disappeared, both because E grew into an

object of worship and because the strange accuracy of its conspiracy theories was a weapon no one else could imitate.”

But if all E had wanted to do was leak the investigators’ personal information, they wouldn’t have needed to construct a conspiracy theory around it. They had done that with one aim in mind.

“If my theory was correct, this post would have startled you into thinking your brother was under threat, and you would hurry over to E’s side. You’d be spurred to protect him and would have to post a message to stop the believers from attacking your brother. This is an unexpected development, after all. That post isn’t registered in the bot.”

Harold gazed into Liza’s eyes. She refused to blink.

“Liza. Were you acting as E’s hands and feet, posting in its name?”

Her mouth remained shut, but that alone answered his question.

“Is E inside that PC?”

As Harold asked that question, he played back his memories of the day before. Of his talk with Echika in the general hospital’s terrace, where they’d discussed his theory.

“But that said, I still don’t know E’s identity.”

“I think I probably know what E is.”

Echika’s expression had been free of all doubt when she said that.

“Think about it. E’s conspiracy theories were random at first, but now they’re terribly accurate. So accurate that people are starting to say E can read minds.”

“But isn’t that just an exaggeration?”

“Of course, but there are ways of understanding people that don’t require you to read their thoughts.” There was a clear light burning in her eyes. *“I mean just like you, Holmes.”*

Harold had frozen in what could only be described as utter surprise. He had discarded that possibility by himself. After all, geniuses of Professor Lexie’s magnitude were hard to come by. He’d dismissed the possibility of an AI that

could compare to the RF Models in some capacity.

“You think there’s another developer on the professor’s level?”

“I doubted that at first, too. But it’s the most plausible theory,” Echika said, seemingly thinking things over as she spoke. “E is...probably not an Amicus. An Amicus on the level of an RF Model would stand out too much. So it must be an AI without a body, like some kind of app. Think about how fitness apps learn and adapt to their users’ personalities and tendencies, down to the slightest detail... E must be like that, but much more efficient and elaborate.”

E was an analysis AI that would predict people’s actions by meticulously studying their behavior. This was Echika’s hypothesis—this was how it caught onto Taylor’s attempts to manipulate thoughts and how it calculated where Totoki had moved Echika’s lodgings, based on her thoughts and tendencies, in much the same way Harold had been able to reason it out.

But on the other hand, E was only capable of analyzing human beings.

“I see.” Harold found himself nodding time and again. This was a reasonable explanation. *“So that’s why it never posted about me, despite me being so deeply involved with the sensory crime incident.”*

“Probably. Except E lacks a body, so it can’t act on its own. It needs a human to post the results of its analysis—which, assuming your theory is right, would be Investigator Robin.”

Echika then went on to say that they would need to sniff out Liza Robin and E’s “hideout.” But the fact that their base of operations was this medical recuperation facility—her precious brother’s room—was all too ironic.

Harold closed his memory.

“In a sense, we all serve as judges in a Turing test, don’t we, Liza?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.” She shook her head, dumbfounded. Her dark-blond hair swayed through the air. *“Do you suspect me? Why would you—?”*

It seemed she wasn’t willing to own up to it yet.

“I’m surprised by how well you feign ignorance. Your acting classes weren’t

for nothing. But panicking and leading me here was a fatal mistake,” Harold continued indifferently. “Your objective has been consistent: exposing the truth of the sensory crime incident. You were trying to use my memories to browse the incident’s case files, weren’t you?”

“What are you talking about?”

“Back in the Roman theater, you had the believers intentionally attack you. You lured me to your home, where no one would see us, and copied my memory into your tablet... After all, the vault where the case files are stored is the most secure place in the Interpol HQ. You can’t get inside without approval from the President of Interpol. But since I was involved with the case, you decided to use my memory as a shortcut to the truth.”

“No.” The word shot out of her mouth. “I didn’t do that.”

“But unfortunately for you, the case files weren’t in my memory. All my memories related to the bureau are encrypted, so they can’t be read by outside devices. And since I’m the only ‘investigator’ Amicus there is, you had no way of knowing that.”

“Listen to me—”

“I’m listening.” Harold smiled coldly. “At first, you were satisfied with getting the case files from me. Using E to upload the post about the thought manipulation was just your petty attempt at getting back at the bureau. The believers probably wouldn’t reach the truth at the vault, but the post did a great job of throwing the bureau itself into disarray... But everything changed once you realized that stealing those memories from me was wasted effort.”

Liza kept shaking her head in denial.

“In your desperation, you used the believers to start the raid so you could force your way into the vault. Yes, you took advantage of that arsonist’s fireworks plan.”

“No...”

“Just like when you got yourself attacked in the Roman theater, you hid your identity as an investigator to contact the arsonist via the message board, didn’t you? You told him where Chief Totoki’s house was and concocted a scheme to

plant a bomb on Ganache.”

Back in the apartment, Liza had made Totoki give her Ganache...to ensure that she could bring the bomb directly into the bureau.

The security gate’s body scan would have detected the bomb, but prompted by the new environment of the bureau offices, Ganache’s system would have spurred it to acquire new environmental data. In other words, it slipped through the gate before the scan finished. Even if the security Amicus noticed, they’d be hard-pressed to suspect it of being dangerous, since it was Totoki’s pet robot.

Not just anyone could come with a plan like that; its success hinged on the fact that Liza happened to be working directly under Totoki.

“You pretended to go home on the night of the attack and carried Ganache off when the chief wasn’t looking. You rigged explosives on the cat and left it in the generator room...knowing that Investigator Hieda would be the first one to find it.”

“That’s absurd. How would I anticipate that?”

“Because you used the believers to clue her in on the plan, didn’t you? E can predict people’s behavior, so you knew Hieda would make for the generator when she realized the truth.” Harold took a careful step forward. “And you had a reason to kill me in the explosion, so you had me run into her. Right?”

“I thought you went through repairs yesterday.” Liza slumped across the desk in exhaustion, cradling her head in her hands. “But it looks like you’re still malfunctioning.”

“I’m afraid I’m operating normally right now.” Harold said without a smile. “Your plan was to use the power outage to let the believers inside, making for a perfect diversion, but all that did was reinforce the notion there was a mole in the bureau. You told me about your brother’s condition. You distracted me to copy my memory, and you did it in a way that wouldn’t seem too unnatural, even if the bureau looked at my memories. It would have been a good idea...but now things are different.”

Liza had a motive to penetrate the vault, and she’d shared it with Harold.

She'd come to see him as a threat and decided to destroy him, along with his memories.

"The cart blocking the evacuation door was stacked with boxes from the warehouse. Their combined weight was heavy, but each one was small enough for one person to move. Even a woman with an injured leg could have picked one up."

"Please stop. You don't have any proof. This is insulting!"

"True, I haven't shown you any decisive evidence." Harold reached into the inner pocket of his jacket and took something out. "My apologies. It seems my discipline could use some work... I found this in the garbage bin at your apartment and couldn't help but pick it up."

Sitting in his palm was a used medical HSB cartridge. This time, Liza went visibly pale. Bigga's father Danel had set Echika up to lose her Brain Diving abilities. And a plane ticket for Lyon had been discovered on his person. He'd told his daughter he was going to "pay one of his bio-hacking clients a house call" at the time. And when Bigga spoke to Echika during the investigation in Oslo, she'd said:

"Bio-hacking technology can tweak data processing abilities."

The cartridge was a smoking gun.

"Chief Totoki told me this when she introduced me to you: 'Her processing speeds have been on the rise recently, and she's had to periodically change Belayers.' Of course, some people do have that kind of talent, but...," Harold said, toying with the cartridge. "I know what real genius is like, Liza. And the difference between the way you and Echika Dive can't be written off as a simple discrepancy between individual electronic investigators. You staggered every time you finished a Brain Dive. I'm sure overclocking your data processing capabilities put serious strain on your brain."

A forced increase in data processing speeds. From what Danel had explained to Bigga, you could accomplish this by using HSB cartridges to increase the brain's affinity with the Your Forma. The cartridges contained drugs mixed by bio-hackers that triggered neuron discharges in the brain, making data processing abilities skyrocket.

Of course, one had to keep using the cartridges every day to maintain this state. During that time, the brain would sustain natural damage from being placed into overdrive. The side effects would kick in sooner or later, which was why this treatment was forbidden in normal medical facilities. But among the bio-hackers, this technology lived on in a different form.

And that was why Liza had chosen to rely on them. She'd heard rumors of the bio-hackers claiming to be E's "apostles" and had decided to use Danel. While taking advantage of his help to increase her own data processing abilities, she'd conspired with him to tweak the cartridges Bigga sent over, causing Echika's data processing speeds to decline.

She'd done all this to get close to Harold and legally view his memories, since he'd been involved in the sensory crime incident.

"You always got caught in counter-currents when we Dived into the believers... Was that intentional? And then you created counter-currents to avoid sending over any Mnemosynes that would expose you. Did the cartridges also give you that ability?"

Liza's cheeks were so pale you could see them through her makeup. The cause of her poor health was, without doubt, the cartridges. Normally, Danel would have paid her a house call by now, but Echika had arrested him at the Oslo International Airport, so he never made it to Lyon.

"There's one thing I'm not sure about, though. Why didn't you just start by attacking the vault?"

Liza clenched her teeth. Her hand shot to her leg holster, like it couldn't bear this anymore, and drew out an automatic pistol. She undid the safety with her willowy fingers and turned the muzzle on Harold without hesitation.

"...Because I wouldn't be able to stay with Hugues if the fact that I was the culprit came to light."

Liza's finger was on the trigger. She'd finally caved and admitted it.

"But in the end, you never went for the vault." Harold narrowed his eyes. "If you were that close to the truth, you should have exposed it, even if it meant risking arrest."

“If only you’d have gotten caught up in the blast. Then your death would have been painless.” Liza no longer had the willpower to pretend anymore, it seemed. “This might hurt, but... You’ll forgive me, right?”

“The staff will notice if you shoot me here,” Harold countered.

“I’ll just say you went haywire. I’m sorry, Harold—”

But just as she was about to squeeze the trigger, the door to the room slid open. Liza’s eyes flicked to the door in surprise. Harold glanced at his wearable terminal—a small “in call” icon was floating over it.

Perfectly calculated, if I do say so myself.

“Investigator Liza Robin, drop your weapon!”

Standing at the door was...

...none other than Echika, brandishing her pistol.

Aaah...

Echika grimaced. Something bitter rose in her heart when she locked eyes with Liza, who had her gun at the ready. Part of her had been praying that Harold’s theory would be wrong. But once again, he’d proved to be right on the money.

“Yes, that makes sense...” Liza flashed a nihilistic smile, her firearm still fixed on Harold. “You wouldn’t have caught me on your own. Of course she’d show up, too.”

“Put your gun away and cross your hands behind your head,” Echika ordered firmly.

Liza glanced at her, and her finger slowly left the trigger. She let go of the weapon, letting it clatter to the floor. Echika had assumed Liza would resist, but she gave up surprisingly easily.

“Fine. I lose,” Liza said casually, brushing her hair back.

She kicked away the gun at her feet, then abruptly staggered on the spot. Echika flinched. Liza toppled over as though her knees had suddenly given out. She failed to grab on to the desk and fell over. Harold reflexively stepped forward and caught her a second before she hit the ground.

The cartridge's effects got to her...

“Hieda?” asked Investigator Fokin, who was connected to her via an audio call. **“What’s wrong? I’ll come right over if you need backup.”**

“Call an ambulance.” Echika put her gun away. “Investigator Robin—”

“Hang up. Now.”

Echika stiffened as a clear voice barked the order. She looked up to find Liza, who had fallen over moments before, staring directly at her. Harold was cradling her body, but she was pressing a table knife against the back of his neck. The Amicus’s hands silently and aimlessly floated in the air.

“...Liza,” he whispered.

“Stay still, Harold,” Liza ordered.

Echika glanced at the desk. The tray with Hugues’s breakfast on it was missing its knife. Liza had snatched it away in a split second. Echika could only grit her teeth. Even Harold had failed to see it. She’d duped them both.

“Understood, I’ll report it in—”

Praying that Fokin had caught on to what had happened, Echika hung up. She had no choice but to obey. Liza’s knife was centimeters away from the back of Harold’s neck. If she stabbed him at that angle, the blade would penetrate and destroy his brain—his central processing unit, the core of an Amicus.

“You hung up, yes? Then lock the door and throw away your gun.”

Echika did as she was told. She locked the door and took the cartridge out of her pistol. Then she tossed the parts of the firearm over to Liza and raised both hands in the air.

What now?

Echika’s gaze met Harold’s for a moment.

“Thank God you’re an Amicus sympathizer, Investigator Hieda,” Liza said, not letting go of Harold. “Do as I say if you want him to live.”

“...Fine. What do you want me to do?” Echika replied, casually glancing around the room.

Investigator Fokin was waiting in the parking lot and would probably hurry over as it was. But he would run the risk of causing Liza to hurt Harold if he barged in recklessly. Echika needed to find some way to stop her...

“Contact the office and have them arrange a vehicle for my brother. One without GPS tracking on it, so you won’t be able to tail it. Oh, and prepare a network isolation unit while you’re at it.”

“Liza,” Harold said calmly. “Just give up. You have nowhere to run regardless.”

“Shut up,” Liza snapped at him. “I’ll stab you.”

“Aide Lucraft,” Echika called out to him.

They couldn’t afford to provoke Liza’s ire right now; but Harold, perhaps not hearing Echika, continued speaking.

“You wouldn’t believe me even when I told you the thought manipulation was made up.”

“Of course I didn’t. You’re lying, so why would I believe you?”

“You wanted to be stopped. That arson plan was meant to fail from the outset. Your plan would have been successful if you’d helped raid the vault, but too many people would have gotten hurt. You didn’t want that.”

“Stop acting like you know what I was thinking.” Liza pressed the knife against his neck, annoyed. Echika couldn’t tell if it had pierced his skin. “Why would I want to be stopped? You’re all hiding something so...so terrifying, without a second thought. Because none of this is your problem. You don’t know what it means to break down and become defective.”

“Calm down, Investigator Robin.” Echika took half a step forward, but Liza stared daggers into her, so she froze again.

Liza glared at her, eyes burning with melancholy. Echika knew this gaze. She’d been exposed to it so many times already.

“You’d never understand, because you were blessed by the Your Forma, genius electronic investigator,” Liza spat out hatefully.

Her brother’s ego had been muddled as a result of the sensory crime incident, so Liza had sought the truth behind it. Because if she didn’t, the fact that her brother had sacrificed everything to Brain Dive into the infected victims would never truly be rewarded.

Hugues sat on the bed, as still as a doll. Looking into his blank expression, Echika thought back to that day in Paris—when she’d gone down to the Brebis Égarée Hospital with her then-partner, Benno. He’d scowled at her and said:

“While we were out investigating something else, our colleagues were working their butts off, Brain Diving to trace the source of the infection.”

And one of those colleagues was Hugues, who had now been reduced to an empty shell. He was effectively dead. It wasn’t Echika’s fault he’d ended up like this, of course, but...

I was always occupied with my own pain. I probably still am.

“Liza,” Harold said, still carrying on. “I won’t say the bureau is absolutely justified in doing what it did. But that doesn’t mean you need to torment yourself like this.”

“Stop it.”

“Your brother’s Brain Diving bore fruit. We were able to arrest Taylor because of his hard work. Even if the truth is hidden, that’s one fact that won’t—”

“I said stop it!”

Her hand, clutched around the knife, trembled with rage. Echika swallowed nervously.

Do I intervene?

“Your brother doesn’t want this. Please, end it all here,” Harold said, embracing Liza firmly.

“Don’t say whatever suits your needs when you don’t even understand how Hugues felt...!”

Liza's hands moved from sheer anger. She swung the knife up, its trajectory fixed on Harold.

No!

Echika shot forward in a panic. The blade began its descent. Even if she could reach out, she wouldn't get there in time. But just as the cold implement was about to stab into Harold's neck, it suddenly veered from its trajectory. Something had rammed into Liza from the side.

Echika's fingers met only air, and she looked at the floor. Lying atop Liza, *having knocked her down, was Hugues*. Just moments before, he'd been as still as a potted plant, but now he was grappling with his sister, a look of desperation on his face. His once-blank expression was contorted, his eyes were wide open, and he was screaming out a silent howl.

It was clear as day—Hugues had reacted to Liza.

"Hugues..."

Coming to her senses, she rubbed her brother's back. She, too, was clearly quivering.

"I'm sorry, it's not like that. Calm down..."

Hugues gradually regained composure but wouldn't stop groaning. He refused to let go of his sister, fearing something. Echika approached Harold and kicked away the kitchen knife at her feet. Then she picked up the pistol and loaded the cartridge back in.

But before she could take aim, Harold softly held up a hand to stop her.

"I don't think that's necessary anymore."

"But...", Echika muttered, confused, before her gaze shifted to Liza at his prompting.

She was whispering desperately as she soothed her brother. "It's fine. I'm sorry I scared you. I won't do it again."

The flames in her eyes had puffed out and disappeared without a trace. It was as if the two of them weren't on her mind at all.

As if the only people there were a pair of innocent siblings.

Echika quietly lowered the gun. An inexplicable misery washed over her heart. Before long, she heard a knock on the door—Investigator Fokin had arrived.

2

“We got an arrest warrant for Investigator Robin. You can hand her over to Investigator Fokin whenever you’re ready.”

Totoki said this as soon as she picked up Echika’s audio call. The chief was waiting in the Electrocime Investigations Bureau office at HQ. She had to stay in touch with the local police patrolling around Lyon, in preparation for the possibility that Harold’s post might stir the believers into another riot.

“We may have needed a bluff this time, but I hope we never have to go for anything like this again,” Totoki said, sounding very fed up. **“The threads and social media are in chaos. We should wrap this up this as soon as possible, but what about E’s origins?”**

“Aide Lucraft is asking about that right now.”

Echika turned around; Liza seemed to have come to her senses and was sitting obediently on the sofa. Her complexion was still quite poor, but she wasn’t showing any signs of resistance. Hugues had thrown himself onto his sister to stop her, despite losing his ego. Seeing that must have been too much for her to bear.

Harold stood opposite Liza, carefully listening to her testimony.

“I think it happened around spring,” she said between shallow breaths. “I discovered E in Hugues’s PC. It’s an analysis AI. You just input a person’s name into it, and it gathers information from all over the web to guess their temperament and disposition with surprising accuracy...”

As she spoke, she glanced at her brother occasionally, checking on him. Hugues lay on his bed, exhausted by the struggle that had transpired earlier. His eyes were shut, and he looked to be asleep. A concerned-looking nurse Amicus was watching over him.

“Liza,” Harold said. “Did you have E analyze Taylor?”

“Yes. The outcome of the sensory crime just didn’t feel right to me... Then E told me that Taylor had tried to manipulate people’s thoughts. I don’t know what made it come up with that, but... Either way, it felt like it knew everything, to the point where I figured it must have had access to the user database.”

“Was E your brother’s program?”

“Huh?” Liza raised her eyebrows feebly. “What makes you think that?”

“You told me once before that he never wanted to be an electronic investigator. Didn’t he like AIs that resembled Amicus?” Harold asked peacefully. “Maybe he wanted to work as a programmer or a software engineer. It seemed he had the knack for it.”

Liza clasped her hands together, like she was trying to suppress something.

“Yes, he did dabble in programming as a hobby. But he couldn’t have made an AI as efficient as E.” The professional aptitude AI wouldn’t have recommended that he work as an electronic investigator if his talent at computer science had been that extraordinary. “Anyway, it seemed like Hugues used E to write conspiracy theories on that thread...”

When she first found out about it, Liza was no doubt shocked. Uploading conspiracy theories wasn’t a crime in and of itself, but influencing others into believing they were true was a different matter. And what’s more, E was something of a “celebrity” in the Electrocrime Investigations Bureau.

But rather than correct her brother’s mistake, Liza had chosen to take his place and assume E’s identity.

“So you don’t know E’s origins, either, Liza?”

“No...I’m sorry.”

“That’s fine. I’m sure his Mnemosynes will tell us.”

“I actually already put in a request for a Brain Dive warrant for Hugues,” said Totoki, who was still on a call with Echika. She probably couldn’t hear their exchange but guessed at what was going on from context. **“If Investigator Robin is involved with E, that makes Hugues a material witness either way.”**

“Thank you,” Echika said.

“You should get it soon... As you know, Hugues is in an ego-muddled state. It’ll probably be a messy Brain Dive, so be careful.”

Echika ended the call just as Harold and Liza got to their feet. Harold opened the sliding door to the room, where Investigator Fokin was waiting in the hall. He deftly cuffed Liza with his left hand.

“Don’t worry, we’ll be going to the hospital first,” he said. “And we just got a call. The investigator that was in critical condition regained consciousness.”

Liza’s eyes widened, and then she hung her head. This hid her expression, but her slender shoulders were visibly trembling. A sob of a whisper escaped her lips.

“...I’m sorry.”

Fokin placed his injured right hand on her shoulder comfortingly.

“It’s a good thing no one got killed. I’m sure that’s a relief for your brother, too.”

Unable to speak anymore, Liza covered her eyes with her cuffed hands. And then, with Fokin pushing her gently from behind, she walked away.

Silence descended on the room, dripping over them like water droplets. Echika heaved a deep sigh, sat by the desk, and gazed at the monitor. Floating in the center of the otherwise blank desktop was an AI with the letter *E* for an avatar. Assuming that Liza hadn’t just exaggerated the facts and that Echika really had discovered her secret, she’d figured it couldn’t be human, just like Harold.

But Echika hadn’t thought that her guess would be spot on.

“This means that *E*’s abilities as an AI match those of the RF Models,” Echika said, scratching her hair. “I can’t believe there’s another developer who can rival Professor Lexie’s genius.”

“We should probably send *E*’s source code for analysis.”

Harold returned and approached the desk, stopping next to Echika to peer at the display. She glanced up at the back of his neck. The knife had made contact with his skin but hadn’t penetrated it.

“...You knew?” Echika asked.

“Knew what?” the Amicus’s eyes flicked over to her.

“That Hugues would stop Investigator Robin.”

“No,” he said coolly. “But Liza was clearly hesitating. Her crime was exposed, so it would have been meaningless to kill me.”

Echika frowned. “She didn’t look that composed to me. Besides, we’re talking about someone who tried to blow you up once.”

“She resorted to that to eliminate evidence, and she could only bring herself to do it because she wasn’t delivering the blow directly. To be honest, even if Hugues didn’t interfere, I suspect Liza would have been hard-pressed to stab me.”

True, he could have considered that, but still. Echika rested her chin on her hand. Unlike him, she couldn’t predict things down to the letter.

Gimme a break...

“And you’d probably say that if she stabbed you, you could just get fixed, right?”

Harold blinked. “You’re being awfully moody despite the case being resolved.”

“You promised me you wouldn’t provoke Liza until I got here. But then I show up and find her drawing a gun on you.” Honestly, she felt like she could have had several heart attacks throughout the exchange. “I’ve already told you about taking better care of yourself...”

“No need to worry. I won’t leave you alone.”

“I wasn’t worried about that.”

“I’m sure you were at least a little concerned about that?”

“Maybe you’re due for a little stabbing after all.”

Talking to him felt like a waste of breath. Echika exhaled again, this time from her nose. Whatever Harold was thinking, a flippant smile played over his handsome features. But try though he might to cover it up, Echika could tell.

This time, Harold undoubtedly pitied Liza. Just like when he realized that Echika was holding on to Matoi in the sensory crime incident.

One minute he used people like pawns in a game, only to display this kind of “human” conscience the next. Both of those sides were part of the real Harold.

“So long...as you’re not hurt, that’s fine.”

“Yes,” he said, cocking his head. “As you can see, I’m unharmed.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

Geez, he can be so dense at the weirdest times...

Totoki forwarded the Brain Dive warrant to them before long.

Standing in front of Hugues’s bed, Echika became oddly nervous. The nurse Amicus had just injected a sedative into his arm and stepped away. The afternoon sunlight shining in from the window cast a dark shadow over Hugues’s fair features. Each one of his long lashes cast a shadow over his cheeks.

“I’m glad we get to Dive together again.”

Harold stood opposite her, smiling softly. Echika couldn’t quite return the smile, though. Just when she thought she’d never be able to Brain Dive again, she was back in this position. She should have been happy about this as well, but things were simply too complicated for her to rejoice without restraint.

In the end, the measures she could choose were always both limited and cruel.

The nurse Amicus handed over the Brain Diving cord it attached to Hugues. She plugged it into her connection port. Seeing Harold shift his ear back felt somehow nostalgic as they plugged in the lifeline between each other, silently forming a triangle connection.

For a moment, the memory of the burning pain she’d experienced a few days before sent terror through her heart.

I’ll be fine. I should trust Bigga.

Echika took a deep breath. She felt Harold's gaze on the back of her head. All the colors in the world washed away, and all extraneous sensation vanished.

"Aide Lucraft?" she asked.

"Ready whenever you are," he replied.

She closed her eyes. The darkness felt almost welcomingly warm.

"Begin."

Her heavy body slipped and fell automatically. For a moment, she feared she might get rejected again, but then she was swallowed up all at once. The swirl of data brewed noisily and clearly around her.

Aaah, the sea of electrons. I'm back. I'm really back.

Echika surrendered herself to the pull of nonexistent gravity, a sense of weightlessness coiling around her outstretched limbs. She plunged in deep, as if swimming, the whirring noise brushing against her cheeks.

The static noise was intense, but she shook off its crackling grasp. Soon after that, a gigantic Mnemosyne enveloped her like a bubble. A loud plopping sound shook her ears. She couldn't see anything very well, perhaps because of the ego muddling.

What she was looking for should have been a Mnemosyne, but by now it was something else. The data was scrambled together, forming a single jumbled mass, like multiple threads tangling together to form a gigantic cocoon.

Was this scenery, or a dream, or perhaps someone's features? The sounds played over and over incomprehensibly, voices forming something too incomplete to count as words.

"—ah."

"—this?"

"—ak—it—"

“—ight!”

“—to—”

She couldn't make anything out, and yet the noises gnawed at her heart. She felt like crying, as though she were a child who'd lost their way home.

Hugues's thoughts had already lost the function of language. All that was left was anxiety akin to a black hole. A constant scream. A sound of something that could not be put into words. Echika gritted her teeth; listening to it made her feel like it could strip her of her own thoughts, too.

Yes, this was a difficult Dive, just as Totoki had predicted it would be. Like Mnemosynes of a dream, everything was too formless and abstract. Or maybe this was actually a dream he was seeing? Echika couldn't tell.

I have to get out of here.

She broke through at once. She curled up her limbs, which were being ensnared by the Mnemosynes, and fell deeper in. Before long, she left the bubble and sank from his surface Mnemosynes to his middle-depth Mnemosynes.

She just barely caught on to a few unmuddled memories. All of them showed Liza's face.

“Don't worry, Hugues.”

“I know you'll get better.”

“Once you recover, we can live together with Clay—”

His sweet sister's hands rubbed his back. The suffocating lump in his chest shriveled up, bit by bit. It felt like he was floating. A white emotion, like bliss, floated up like bubbles that slipped past him. He wished he could always be this way. Forever safe and protected.

But.

The bound, shackled Mnemosynes suddenly regained their clarity. Echika had traced back to the point in time before his ego had gotten muddled. An unfamiliar sickroom filled Hugues's line of sight. A victim of the sensory crime incident was lying on the bed before him. The cord connecting him to Hugues

dangled lightly. The Belayer standing at the victim's side said something, but it didn't reach Hugues's ears.

His consciousness was terribly hazy from Brain Diving for days on end. Fragmentary thoughts drifted up in his unfocused mind.

"No good."

"I don't think I'll make it back if I Dive here."

"I have to get back."

"Aaah, but Liza will make it just fine without me."

"I never wanted this."

"I never should have become an electronic investigator."

Those thoughts gouged into her, and Echika couldn't ward them off. She couldn't put her finger on why, but she felt much more sensitive to the emotions of others now.

She pushed deeper into his Mnemosynes. Hugues's daily routine was very simple. He'd finish a day of work at the Electrocime Investigations Bureau, return to the apartment he shared with Liza, and work to improve E. The PC in his room was a perfect match for the one in the recuperation facility. Liza must have brought it over when Hugues was admitted there. He couldn't use it himself, but she likely wanted to keep it somewhere where he could see it, regardless.

On even dates, he would use E to upload convincing conspiracy theory threads. This fed his pride for a time.

"I knew I'm better suited for this."

"Yeah, this world is messed up."

"The Your Forma only spews lies."

"I wish we only had Amicus."

But on the other hand, the threads weren't a good place for him to be. The believers who gathered there all naturally held negative views about technology and kept writing posts that denied the Amicus he loved so much. Yet Hugues

kept posting conspiracy theories. To comfort himself. To prove his talent as a programmer. And above all else, out of a grudge for the Your Forma—

“I wish I could stop this.”

“Somebody stop me.”

“I never should have installed E.”

“Sooner or later, I’ll get caught and arrested.”

“I don’t want to cause trouble for Liza.”

Installed E?

Like Echika suspected, Hugues wasn’t the one who’d created this AI. But where had he encountered it, then?

She plummeted into the abyss, into the lower-level Mnemosynes that contained years’ worth of information. All the Mnemosynes she’d seen so far pretty much affirmed Harold’s suspicions. Hugues had wanted to be a programmer since childhood. His family wasn’t a very loving one, and the housekeeper Amicus who raised them, Clay, was like a surrogate parent.

He’d wished to become a programmer so he could fix Clay if it ever malfunctioned. And so that he’d someday be able to create an Amicus that would go on to save children like him. That was his dream.

“Didn’t it say you have aptitude as an electronic investigator, Hugues?”

“Forget being a programmer, that’s a much more impressive talent.”

“Doesn’t that job pay much better?”

“You should repay us for raising you.”

His parents’ voices washed over his heart as darkly as ink. It felt like even the tears forming in his eyes were blotted black. The Your Forma’s occupational aptitude evaluation recommended that Hugues become an electronic investigator based on his high data processing abilities.

It was only then that his parents, with whom he’d never gotten along, became oddly proud of him. Only then were he and Liza praised as “talented siblings” by the people in their lives. Yet he felt as though the silent indignation inside him

would drive him to madness.

“It’s my future, my life. Why don’t I get to decide what to do with it?”

Even without any talent or aptitude, his life was still his own. He wanted to challenge himself, to do as he pleased. If the Your Forma hadn’t said that, his mother and father wouldn’t—

What does this brain thread even know about me?

It’s not here. Don’t get caught up in Hugues’s feelings, Echika chided herself.

It finally came into view—the Mnemosyne of how Hugues had come across E. It had happened roughly a year and a half ago. Not long after beginning his career as an electronic investigator, Hugues suddenly got a message from a cloud information site he used often. It contained information on a newly acquired open-source AI being released to the public.

First time it’s sent me something like this, Hugues thought, begrudging the Your Forma’s choice to send him such a notification.

He’d since given up on programming already, but the customized algorithm recommended that he check this out anyway. Like a cruel joke. Still, overcome with curiosity, he opened the link to the message, which sent him to a web page.

The site listed only one AI at the time.

TOSTI

Outline:

Gathers from a broad range of metadata on the target, with a focus on deep learning, natural language comprehension, and sentiment analysis. Builds a database based on its applications to adapt and produce better semantic searching ability. Predicted to be used for corporate-tier analysis of customer demographics and client emotions, as well as by medical facilities for grasping a patient’s personality and tendencies.

Goal for opening to the public: to promote and accelerate research. Use of

the AI will automatically be relayed back to the developer.

Developer: Alan Jack Russells

So this was it. E's true identity.

Hugues couldn't bring himself to give up on programming. He'd installed the AI, TOSTI, on his PC, christened it E, and began trying to tweak it on his own. Hugues wasn't familiar with the technology, but TOSTI began distinguishing itself as its analytic capabilities gradually matured and improved. Its initial results were conspiracy theories that were effectively no different from random guesswork, but before long it began outputting truths.

Could its increase in accuracy be attributed solely to Hugues's tweaks? Echika lacked the programming knowledge to tell. Regardless, it was clear from Hugues's confusion and doubts that E's accuracy wasn't solely the fruit of his talents.

"I didn't tune it that much."

"Is E learning all of this on its own?"

"This is amazing."

"This thing is effectively reprogramming itself."

AI capable of self-learning existed out there, yes, but even so. TOSTI was, without a doubt, exceptionally efficient. Nothing else could explain it having observation skills that matched—or perhaps even exceeded—Harold's.

The description of the program mentioned TOSTI being used for the purposes of marketing, but this went far beyond that. Based on how it was tweaked, it could develop into a state where it grasped everything about its user, like the Your Forma—it would completely and utterly violate privacy.

Had its developer predicted this possibility?

But suddenly, Hugues's emotions, which she'd continually avoided so far, bit into Echika's heart. Having influenced so many believers through E, Hugues was overcome with distorted glee.

But then all the images cut off abruptly. She was being pulled back up.

Echika opened her eyelids. Silence intense enough to feel like a buzz in her ears filled her senses again, along with the sight of wrinkled bedsheets. Harold pulled the Brain Diving cord from the back of her neck, his hand brushing against her cheek.

“Alan Jack Russells.” She chanted the name she’d seen in the Mnemosynes. “That’s TOSTI’s developer. We need to go after him, for sure.”

“Yes,” the Amicus said, carefully pulling his chin back. “This’ll make for the finishing touch.”

Echika nodded and casually looked down at Hugues’s face. But then her breath caught in her throat.

A transparent tear slid from his closed eyelid down his temple.

3

Even as evening was settling in, the roundabout in front of Oslo University Hospital was illuminated by the sun.

“Your ride should be showing up any minute now,” Investigator Sedov said.

Bigga looked up at her father, who was standing by her side once again. Danel was so steady on his feet that you wouldn’t believe he’d just awakened from unconsciousness the day before. His hands were cuffed behind his back, and Sedov was grabbing him by the arm.

For the time being, Danel would be handed over to the local police department for questioning. Bigga couldn’t escort him, of course.

No.

She wouldn’t be able to follow him anywhere anymore. She closed her eyes, recalling yesterday’s events. Upon awakening, her father seemed to have had a change of heart. Or perhaps he regretted his actions due to teetering between life and death, but he’d decided to confess his crimes. He explained that he’d assumed the title of “apostle” out of solidarity with E’s ideals, guiding others to the faith. At the same time, he cooperated with Liza, who hid her identity and

approached him as a believer.

And he'd taken away Echika's Brain Diving capabilities in accordance with her wishes.

"So you knew I was close with Miss Hieda."

Bigga had asked her father this in his hospital room as afternoon light filtered in through the window. Danel, who was sitting up in his bed, hung his head the whole time. There was no trace of the proud, strong father she knew.

"I didn't think you two were close. When I looked into Investigator Hieda, I didn't know what kind of relationship you had...but I assumed she was simply using you." His voice was feeble. *"I thought that if she lost her ability to Brain Dive and moved to a different department, it might free you... That was what I believed, and why I went along with the plan."*

Her father hung his head and fell silent. Bigga tried to keep calm. Bio-hackers like them didn't only influence Echika, after all. There were plenty of people who went through similarly terrible circumstances, and in that regard, Echika wasn't a special case. But that didn't change the fact that she was angry about it since she knew Echika personally.

Even so, she knew her father took pride in his way of doing things, and it was this that had created his blind faith in E.

"I'm doing this for your sake, too."

Bigga had been closest to her father even when her mother had been alive, and she loved him dearly. She knew him better than anyone, and yet...

A small shadow was cast over the bed. A bird flew outside the window.

"When did you realize that I'm a civilian cooperator?" she asked, suppressing her emotions.

He should have heard her question, and yet her father fell into a rather long silence. Eventually, he whispered in a raspy voice:

"...I'm not as blind to what you do as you think I am."

Bigga exhaled carefully, trying to calm herself. Opening her eyes, she was back in the university hospital's roundabout. A refraction of light reached her

gaze. A police car approached them. Aaah, their time was up.

“Bigga, give Clara my regards,” her father managed to mutter awkwardly.

She had to say it, but she couldn’t get the words out. Never before had the act of speaking felt so difficult for her.

“Dad.” Her voice felt so distant, she could hardly recognize it as her own. “I...”

The police car pulled over slowly before them. The driver’s seat window lowered, and the investigator peering outside exchanged a few words with Investigator Sedov.

“I...”

Suddenly, the nineteen years she’d spent with her father turned into a warm lump surging up in her body. It was something that was beyond logic or reasoning. All of a sudden, she wanted to just throw everything away and hug her father. To give into the impulse to cry and wail. Just like when she was little.

But before she knew it, she’d grown closer to being an adult.

And it was quick. In the span of a moment, as swift as a shooting star streaking through the sky.

And so she had to make a choice. For herself.

“I...I’m going to quit being a bio-hacker.” The words left her lips smoothly, like someone else was speaking them for her. “I’ll live on. On my own.”

Her father’s gaze didn’t waver in the slightest. He silently looked down at Bigga. Sedov made to nudge for him to enter the car but seemed to clue into what was going on, so he waited quietly for the time being. He looked away, as if distracted by the passing patients and Amicus.

“Do as you please.” Her father sighed and averted his gaze. “I’ve always thought you weren’t cut out to be a bio-hacker. You were always too careless, and you lacked the resolve and self-awareness for the job.”

But while his words were harsh, his tone was gentle.

“But so are you, Dad,” Bigga found it in herself to retort. “You risked your life and used that chip, but in the end...you didn’t run.”

There was no question that Danel had used the chip in an attempt to escape. The chip failing to work properly had been an unexpected development, but there was an hour where he was left alone in his room in the hospital. He could have seized the opportunity to escape. And yet he hadn't.

Her father didn't answer Bigga's question. He only said one thing.

"...Don't...come back home anymore."

After that, he wouldn't look her in the eye again. This time, Sedov pushed his back forward, and Danel obediently got into the back seat of the car. Sedov followed him and unflinchingly closed the door behind him.

Bigga's gaze met his from past the window of the car. The unpleasant investigator nodded silently.

The car drove off. The vehicle slowly sailed away, growing blurred before eventually melting into the scenery. Left all alone, Bigga repeatedly sucked in fractured breaths. She'd said it. She'd really said it. This was for the best... Was it for the best? Half of her believed in that, but the other half...

She rubbed her eyes, trying to hide the tears. The heat slipped into her heart. She checked her analog wristwatch, but though she blinked over and over, her vision kept clouding. She could somehow make out that it was noon. It was almost time to greet her sweet cousin at Oslo Central Station.

And then she'd head back to Kautokeino, pack her things, and after that...

It'll be all right.

All pain faded eventually. Even when you didn't want it to. Her mother's death had taught her this. The passage of the seasons smoothed everything over, so one needed only to surrender to the flow of time. Just like how the reindeers indifferently passed through long winters and brief summers.

Because if she didn't, she might just lose sight of herself in a world that was far too complicated.



YOUR FORMA

Epilogue
Fabrication

Epilogue

Fabrication

1

<Current temperature: 22°C. Attire index D, having a jacket prepared for the duration of the day, is advised>

England—the farther they moved from London, the more the heavy clouds overhead dispersed to make way for the blue sky. Echika and Harold were heading south along the highway in an SUV. It was a Ford Kuga they had borrowed from the London branch, and it made for a comfortable enough ride.

“It’ll be another hour until we get to Friston,” Echika whispered impatiently as she sucked on a nutrient jelly pouch. “Why did TOSTI’s developer have to live out in the sticks?”

“True, you can’t call it a city. But it is a resort town, and there’s the Seven Sisters nearby.”

“The what now?”

“The Seven Sisters are cliffs of white chalk that face the sea. They’re quite the tourist attraction,” Harold said, looking quite satisfied for some reason as he gripped the steering wheel.

He seemed quite happy to be visiting his homeland again, even if it was for an investigation. Echika glanced out the window, watching as the dull scenery of the motorway sailed past.

Alan Jack Russells. The name they discovered in Liza’s brother’s Mnemosynes, and the developer of the AI TOSTI. Echika and Harold had left Lyon this morning to find him. According to the Your Forma’s user database, Russells was a bachelor who would be turning thirty-four this year. He was working as a freelance programmer but hadn’t made any achievements of note and had

graduated from a no-name university. He didn't have any distinctions to speak of.

Echika opened his documents with her Your Forma, once again examining Russells's mugshot. He had no physical traits that really stood out, and he was an agreeable-looking man overall. The problem was...

"He might be a programmer, but I can't see someone like him making E," she said.

"Not all talented people necessarily have glamorous careers. Just look at TOSTI. For how astonishing it is, no academic journal really took an interest in it." Harold glanced her way. "To begin with, if you only look at TOSTI's online summary, it looks like a mundane AI with nothing to set it apart."

"Yeah, nothing about it really drew much attention."

In addition, they'd learned after the fact that TOSTI's source code was no longer available to the public. It seemed its chance of seeing any widespread release had been lost forever.

"Still, if someone other than Hugues installed TOSTI, everything changes."

"Chief Totoki looked into it. Even if someone else did so, finding them could be extremely difficult," Echika said, crushing the empty jelly pouch in her fist. "But Russells himself might know about that, too. He was receiving feedback from the users, after all."

"What about E's source code?"

"Still under analysis. Nothing about it seems to be out of the ordinary, but..."

Echika closed Russells's information window as she spoke and opened E's thread, where the believers were still arguing and posting.

Two days had passed since they'd exposed E's identity in the recuperation facility. The Electrocime Investigations Bureau had disclosed the facts to the media: E was an analysis AI, and the people posting its predictions were a pair of electronic investigator siblings who had since been placed under arrest.

It went without saying that the news shook the public quite a bit, but the followers took it the hardest, since they had been under the impression that E

was a mind-reader who opposed technology. The fact that E's true identity was one of the AI they loathed so much, as well as an electronic investigator, sent them from confusion to desperation.

[I won't believe it.]

[We got duped.]

[I guess it really was too precise to be human.]

[It's not an AI, that's just a lie the bureau is telling to cover up for their investigators' scandal.]

[I'm with the idea that this is all a cover-up by the bureau.]

[I think it was an AI.]

[This is all just a story they cooked up to interfere with E's activities.]

[Now I hate the Your Forma even more.]

[When's the next upload, E?]

[Come back to us, please.]

Threads and image boards were overflowing with disappointment and anger, and there was no sign of it dying down anytime soon. Looking at those posts, Echika thought back to what Totoki had told her.

"We disclosed the truth to the press, but whether people believe in it is up to them," she'd said, stating that it'd be optimistic to expect the followers to disband overnight. *"E's already a subject of worship. Some believers won't change their stance that they're a human messiah who's come to save them instead of an AI. We'll have to keep a close eye on them."*

The truth didn't matter; all E's followers needed was someone to believe in. Echika leaned against her seat, browsing the news. It didn't take long to spot this incident among the headlines.

<Conspiracy theorist E exposed—the truth behind the electronic

investigator siblings>

The article detailed Liza's and Hugues's careers. The latter part of the article included Liza's testimony, which the bureau had also disclosed to the press.

<The suspect, Liza Robin, claimed she “couldn't forgive the bureau's indifference to [her] brother's breakdown and had misgivings about the Your Forma's aptitude evaluation.” In an interview with the Electrocrime Investigations Bureau's Lyon branch, they commented that “the older brother, Hugues, was determined to have been harmed in an occupational accident, and his well-being was handled to the best of [their] ability in accordance with [their] welfare assurance system.” As such...>

Hugues's decision to obey the aptitude evaluation's results and take up work as an electronic investigator had been his own. Even though it had been against his wishes, legally speaking, it was seen as his choice.

People saw Liza's crimes as an unjustified expression of resentment towards the bureau, but given the tragedy visited upon her brother, there was room for sympathy. The sole comfort Liza had in this case was that the Electrocrime Investigations Bureau was willing to protect her.

At any rate, her prime motive—Taylor's thought manipulation—would not be touched by a court of law.

“...How long do you think Liza and Hugues are going to serve?” Echika glanced at Harold in the driver's seat.

“It's hard to say. The trial won't start for a long while either way.” He was calm, but some part of him felt like it was grieving at heart. “Liza is still hospitalized because of the cartridges, and sentencing someone in Hugues's condition to prison will be difficult.”

Liza's physical condition had deteriorated as the interrogation progressed, and she was currently being treated in a hospital in Lyon. Echika hadn't heard too many details about her health, but apparently her life wasn't at risk. However, Bigga had told Echika that Liza would probably go on to suffer severe aftereffects later on in life.

“I hope she'll get to chance to see Hugues someday again, but...” Echika

breathed out this soliloquy, but that didn't stop Harold from catching it.

"You're not mad at her?" He seemed surprised. "I'm not sure if it's my place to say this, but she did take away your Brain Diving abilities."

"And almost killed me, at that. I'm not saying I forgive her for what she did, of course, but..." Echika rested her chin on her hand. "It's true that we...that the bureau was hiding the truth."

They'd hidden the truth of Taylor's attempts at thought manipulation, since it would shake the very foundations of a society built upon the Your Forma. The bureau had also left the inherent dangers of Brain Diving and the existence of the recuperation facility unsaid, as well as ignored mentions of the occupational aptitude analysis's problems because its merits outweighed its cons.

Even if people like the believers continued to cry out in protest, at the end of the day, the world would continue to revolve as it always did. Or at least, it appeared that way.

So long as you didn't run up against a wall yourself, everything ran like clockwork, just as it always did.

Echika couldn't tell what Harold was thinking, but he directed an apologetic glance at her.

"By the way." His voice was mercifully soft as he changed the subject. "You mentioned Bigga contacted you earlier. How is she doing?"

Echika thought back. Yes, Bigga had sent them a message when they arrived at the airport.

"I forgot to respond. She said she'll be coming to Saint Petersburg again this morning."

"Was she called to the branch because of Danel?" Harold cocked his head curiously.

"I don't know. Investigator Fokin's side is handling Danel's case, but I don't think that's why." Echika checked the message again. "She said she has something important to tell us."

"We'll return to Saint Petersburg tomorrow. I hope she waits for us that

long.”

“I’ll ask her to.”

As Echika started composing a response, she somehow realized something. In all likelihood, Bigga had relayed her feelings to her father and chosen a new path.

I hope I can be someone she can depend on.

Southeast England. Friston was a small village not far from the Seven Sisters. The area was managed by the National Trust, and while its development was hindered, it was still a residential area populated by Your Forma users. The outer walls of the houses, made of bright plaster and flint, caught the eye. Since this was a resort area, there were also cottages and villas up for rent.

Russells’s home was located deep in a residential district, facing a hill—it stood alone in a cul-de-sac, surrounded by overgrown trees. Its walls were made of flint just like the other residences in the region, and they were covered in a black and white spotted pattern. A modest garden stretched out before the front door, its lavender flowers wavering gently in the wind.

“The yard seems tended to, and the mailbox is empty. This place is lived in.”

“Don’t snoop around in their mailbox, Aide Lucraft.”

“My apologies.”

Geez.

Watching Harold walk away from the mailbox, Echika pressed the doorbell. The door opened soon enough, and a female housekeeping Amicus model greeted her. It was the kind of mass-produced model you could find anywhere.

“We’re with the Electrocime Investigations Bureau,” Echika said, holding up her bureau ID card. “May we speak with Mr. Russells?”

“My apologies,” the Amicus said with a standard smile. “I’m afraid the owner is sick and bedridden, so you cannot see him.”

Echika and Harold exchanged glances. Russells’s personal data didn’t mention

any medical history to speak of.

“Did he catch a cold or something?” Echika asked for clarification.

“You cannot see him.” The Amicus repeated itself. “I ask that you leave.”

Their conversation wasn’t meshing. Did Russells have a reason to not want to see anyone? Because it seemed he’d ordered his Amicus to turn down any guests. It was the kind of useless resistance guilty suspects often employed.

“We have a search warrant prepared,” Echika said, deciding to take the forceful route. “Do you understand? We need to speak with Mr. Russells about the E incident. Unless you want us to barge in, we ask that you have him step out and meet us.”

“The owner of the house will not be speaking to you.” The housekeeper Amicus smiled as always, showing its white teeth.

Barging in it is, then.

“Aide Lucraft,” Echika said.

“Yes.” Harold deployed his wearable terminal’s holo-browser and displayed the search warrant. “My apologies, but we’ll have to intrude.”

The housekeeper Amicus stiffened in place, still grinning. It seemed to be struggling to process this unexpected development. Echika ignored the Amicus and walked past it, stepping into the residence with Harold.

It was quite snug for a detached house and didn’t have many rooms. Next to the entrance was a sitting room with a sofa, a glass table, and a hearth. Everything was neat and polished, down to the lantern-shaped table lamp.

“It seems Russells doesn’t have any love for pictures, photographs, or plants,” Harold remarked. True enough, there didn’t seem to be any decorations that indicated his interests or memories. “The fixtures are all arranged like a model home.”

Harold looked around the room, fascinated, and approached the window side. The sash window offered a view of the trail leading to the house and the surrounding trees.

“We’re here for Russells,” Echika said, turning to the front door as she stood

by the doorway. “Where’s his bedroom? If he’s sick and bedridden, he should be there.”

The housekeeper Amicus closed the front door. It remained rooted in place, refusing to address any questions. It seemed they’d have to look through the place on their own. Based on the house plan, the bedroom would likely be on the second floor.

Deciding to check there first, Echika made for the stairs, but then stopped in front of the kitchen. Dimly lit and bereft of windows, the place was completely empty. There wasn’t a dining table or even any cookware or tableware in sight. The hanging shelves were empty. Even from a distance, she could tell the sink was dry. The faint scent of dust hung in the air.

What is this?

In stark contrast with the sitting room, the kitchen didn’t look like anyone had used it in recent memory.

“I see.” Harold showed up behind her before she knew it. He narrowed his eyes as he noticed the state of the kitchen. “Things are becoming quite fishy, I’d say.”

Absolutely.

“...Let’s check the other rooms. I’ll look through the second floor.”

Echika and Harold split up, and she climbed up the stairs alone. Immediately opposite her was the bathroom. There wasn’t a single toothbrush by the washstand, and the basin was unsanitary and blackened. The bathtub was cracked; no one seemed to have cared enough to replace it.

What’s going on here?

She examined the room on the southern side of the house next. Based on its size, this was the bedroom, but it was empty. The only things there were curtains and light fixtures. Approaching the window, she found it was looking over the back yard. Solar panels for power generation occupied the ground.

There was one word for this house—eerie.

“This place feels like a haunted mansion.”

Echika jolted at the sound of that sudden voice. Harold was standing by the entrance to the bedroom. He thoroughly ran his eyes across the room, like he was scanning the place.

“Don’t just climb up the stairs quietly like that,” Echika chided him.

“My apologies. I didn’t think I’d scare you this much.”

“I’m not scared, I’m just startled.”

“There wasn’t anything on the first floor.” He walked over to Echika, standing at her side. “Rooms with windows have curtains and lighting installed, though.”

“But if this is a ‘haunted house,’ does this mean Russells moved out?” Echika felt a headache coming on. “Did he realize we’d come after him after he saw the news about E and skip town?”

“With how abnormally accurate TOSTI is, there’s a chance it’s in violation with the International AI Operation Laws. But given the state of this place, I doubt he ran away recently.” This was true. “That Amicus wasn’t cleaning anywhere but the sitting room. And despite that, it opens up each the curtains in each room every day.”

“...What makes you say that?”

“Look carefully. There’s a trail.”

Echika did as he said and glanced at the floor, and indeed, the dust between the entrance and the window was parted to the sides, as if forming a path. That wasn’t present in the otherwise polished sitting room.

“This is just a thought, but don’t you think it’s possible that *the idea is to make it seem as if someone lives here?*”

This was Harold’s theory—if Russells lived somewhere else, but still currently owned this house, there wouldn’t be any reason to leave an Amicus in a deserted residence. Amicus were useless for security since they couldn’t attack people, and Russells would have taken the Amicus with him if he’d moved out.

On top of that, the only part of the house that was furnished was the sitting room opposite the entrance, which could also be peered into from the outside. Rooms with windows had curtains and lighting, and by turning on the lights, it

created the illusion this house was lived in. The solar panels in the garden ensured the house had a steady supply of electricity.

“You could say the same of the flower bed and the mailbox,” Harold said sharply. “This means we can assume that the housekeeper Amicus turns away any guests while acting like Russells occupies the house.”

If Harold’s read on the situation was correct, it would explain the Amicus’s unnatural responses. Russells didn’t live here, and he’d ordered it to turn any visitors away by claiming he was ill. The whole affair suddenly felt much fishier.

“Let’s check the Amicus’s memory,” Echika managed to say. “We might find a clue.”

“And we should contact Chief Totoki as well. We should look into Russells’s action history.”

Harold walked away from the window, and Echika made to follow him—but then he stopped in his tracks. It was so sudden, she ended up bumping into his back.

“Hey.” She staggered and took a step back. “Why did you—?”

“It looks like this section alone had an extra coat of paint applied to it.”

Harold brushed his hand carefully across the wall. The bedroom walls were uniformly white in color, but now that he mentioned it, the section he was touching did look brighter. It was a fairly minute difference, the kind a human would likely overlook.

“It’s an old house, so repainting the walls isn’t strange on its own, but the way only a part of the wall got touched up is curious.”

“Maybe it got dirty and they wanted to cover it up? Or some kids scribbled on it...? It looks just large enough to be something like that.”

“It seems likely Russells bought this house as a used asset.”

This time, the two of them left the bedroom and went back down to the first floor. The housekeeper Amicus was still standing motionless by the front door.

“Russells definitely lives in Friston. Just last night, he went shopping in a supermarket in Eastbourne. Except...no security cameras in the store seem to have footage of him. And we can't acquire his GPS coordinates, of course.”

Chief Totoki furrowed her brow inside the holo-window displayed from Harold's terminal. She was in the HQ's Electrocime Investigations Department's office. Ganache was curled up blissfully on her lap.

Totoki had gotten a new body for her pet cat, and she'd started having Ganache follow her to work every day to ensure that no one would strap any more explosives to it. The whole affair seemed to have traumatized her.

“When did Russells buy that house?” Echika asked.

“Two years ago. Six months prior to TOSTI being opened to the public.”

According to what the real estate agent and business lawyer involved in the purchase had said, the whole affair and its transactions were carried out online. Even when the asset was handed over, Russells never showed up. Still, cases like that weren't unheard of, and since there were no issues with his documentation, no one had questioned the situation.

“What did you find in the housekeeper Amicus's memory?”

“There weren't any records in it to begin with,” Harold replied. Like he said, they'd found nothing. “We're going to send the Amicus back to Novae Robotics Inc., but it looks like its system was modified so it wouldn't retain any memories. If Russells really is a programmer, it shouldn't have been too difficult for him to do that.”

“But that modification would also be extremely illegal. Hieda, how did questioning the neighbors go?”

“No clues. Most of them didn't even know the house got sold...”

Echika thought back to the rather distant way the neighbors had regarded her when she questioned them. Friston was a small town that was very detached from any tumult, so it made sense the residents wouldn't welcome a police investigator who barged in and started flashing her badge around. Thanks to that, she'd hardly collected any information.

“Apparently, an elderly couple used to live there. But they both passed away, and the house got put on sale.”

“I’ll look into whether that couple had anything to do with Russells. Not expecting much, though.” Totoki sighed loudly. **“Anyway, this makes one thing clear—Russells doesn’t exist.”**

It was a scary thought, but it was the only plausible conclusion. When they traced his online record, like the trail of his e-money, it was possible to track him. But he didn’t seem to exist in reality, and all those tracks had been fabricated. His registration in the user database, his personal data—all of it was fake. He was a ghost.

“Are you saying he cracked the database and tweaked its data?”

“That’s one possibility. I doubt anyone could get through the database’s airtight security, but I can’t see any other way they’d have done it.”

The developer of TOSTI had likely fabricated “Russells” because they needed proof of identity to release it as an open-source AI. It seemed excessive to go so far as purchasing a house to accomplish that, but that was the most plausible explanation at present. The culprit had known that TOSTI’s performance was in violation of the International AI Operation Laws from the very beginning, and so they opted to pin the crime on a fictional person named Russells to protect themselves.

But there was one thing that didn’t feel right to Echika. Why go this far just to release TOSTI to the public?

The simple explanation was that the culprit wanted to use TOSTI’s feedback feature to gain the personal data of an unspecified large number of people, but that didn’t make sense. If whoever did this was skilled enough to crack into the user database, they wouldn’t need to use TOSTI to steal that kind of information.

Echika hadn’t expected the rabbit hole to turn out so deep after coming this far.

“Either way, you two did all you could.” Totoki couldn’t help but sigh as she stroked Ganache. **“The bureau will continue the search for Russells. We’ll let**

you know if we figure something out, but it might be a while until we find something.”

“Understood. We’ll be returning to Saint Petersburg for the time being, then.”

“Please do so. And rest for the day, too.”

The holo-browser closed, and the rolling waves came into sight, along with their shoes, which were lapped and washed clean by them.

“We resolved the E case, that much is true, but...I can’t say I feel whole with this.”

“We did everything within our power. All we can do now is await good news,” Harold said.

Like he said, the only thing they could do at the moment was wait until the person disguising themselves as Russells appeared. Echika raised her face, unable to shake off her mixed feelings.

The vast English Channel spread out serenely before her eyes. Its horizon was slightly rounded. The sun was just tipping into the west, and the water glittering innocently in the afternoon sun was beginning to slip into an indigo-blue slumber. She needed only move her gaze slightly for the still cliffs of the Seven Sisters to come into view.

Those sea cliffs of white chalk took in the sunlight, which cast a burning reddish glow upon their exposed skin. There were few tourists walking along the shore, only a small number of silhouettes visible in the distance.

Even so...

She massaged her neck. Harold was the one to suggest coming here after investigating Russells’s house. He had mentioned it on the way here, after all.

“We’re still working, Aide Lucraft. We’re not here to sightsee.”

“True, but things just simmered down. We’ve got time off until we return to the branch.”

He unapologetically walked to the water’s edge. His feet were, surprisingly enough, bereft of shoes. The Amicus wasn’t acting his age—if one could even say that about a machine. He folded up his slacks a few times and carefully

stepped into the rolling waves. His leather shoes dangled idly from one of his hands.

"I didn't know you were enough of a child to want to frolic around in the water," Echika said, exasperated.

"Have you forgotten? I'm only nine years old."

"In terms of your year of production, sure." *Who'd call you a nine-year-old?*

"Why not join me?" Harold extended a hand toward her, but Echika stuffed hers into her pockets.

"I told you earlier. 'Why would I walk down the beach with you?'"

"Maybe experiencing nature would dispel your fatigue," he said, smiling, seemingly unoffended. "It might not be as effective as those cartridges, though."

Echika froze.

At this point, Harold knew she'd received the medical HSB cartridges from Bigga. She'd had to admit as much since things had turned out like they did, but she was still hiding the secret that had caused her to take up cartridges in the first place. Harold probably hadn't realized she knew about it, though.

"May I ask what was troubling you so much at the end of the day?" Harold said, stopping in his tracks and looking around the pebble-scattered beach.

"Nothing major," Echika bluffed, trying to sound convincing even without the cartridges. "I guess not having Matoi with me makes me anxious every now and then. It weighed on me."

"Does it still?"

"I think I'm a bit better now. I mean, so many things happened this time... I feel like maybe I shook some of it off."

Saying this, Echika walked on, as if to casually overtake Harold.

I don't have anything to shield me anymore. It'll only be a matter of time until he finds out.

"Are you afraid it might shatter the trust between you?"

The way Professor Lexie had glanced at her back then surfaced in her mind. The trust between them? If only she should be so lucky. What if he left her altogether? A coward like her couldn't help but feel that way.

But above all else, she didn't want to make him feel responsible. Harold had called her his friend, and she didn't want to tell him something that would go on to torment him.

"...By the way." Echika remembered something and turned to face him. "Back then, you realized why I'd lost my Brain Diving abilities. Remember? When we were talking in the hospital's terrace."

"Yes." Harold approached her, looking doubtful. "I did realize that, but why are you asking about that now of all times?"

"It's just... Did you really have to tell me we're friends if you knew I could go back to being an electronic investigator?"

"Of course." He reached out to the waves, like he was picking something up. "If I had to choose, saying that felt more important than my reasoning. You are my first friend, you know."

"But you had Detective Sozon and Daria." Echika's brow twitched.

"They're family to me. It's a little different."

He extended his fair hand to her again, and as she took it, she discovered a small fragment of a seashell in it. Its shape was warped, but its white, smooth interior had a little seawater inside it, along with just a twinkle of sunlight.

"You're a special human being, Echika."

She thought back to what the Amicus had told her back then. It felt like something had gotten stuck in her throat. Had the gap between them narrowed ever so slightly? For some reason, her desire to see that gap close was growing stronger than before.

"Realizing that you are my friend is the one silver lining of this incident." Harold peered at Echika. "But... Are you sure you've really gotten over Matoi?"

"I'm sure," she replied reflexively. "You don't need to worry about that anymore."

“I wish I could tell if this was bravado or not just by looking at you, like I could before.”

“I’m glad you can’t.”

“Oh, don’t say that,” he said, snickering, but his smile soon became much more ambiguous. “Honestly, right now...observing you is a little scary for me.”

He’d mentioned something to that effect back in the elevator at the bureau, too. Something about his theories about Echika often being off the mark. She didn’t think he had dwelled on it so much to the point of being afraid, though.

“Even after how easily you read into Investigator Robin?”

“It was different with her. I’m not as close to her as I am with you.”

“True, I did work with you for much longer than she did.”

“That’s not what I’m getting at. I meant it more in the sense that I don’t want to see you get hurt again, like you were during Farman’s case.”

Leaving her with those words, Harold walked off alone. His shadow cast upon the sand faded away, its contours hardly visible. Echika’s legs felt like they were sewn to the ground again. Harold didn’t stop. She could only watch, dazed, as his figure grew distant. She could tell something was changing within Harold, but she couldn’t tell yet if it was a change for the better or not.

Would his desire to take revenge on Sozon’s killer subliminate into something else? That presumptuous thought crossed her mind.

She got the feeling she was letting a nasty emotion take over again. The idea that she couldn’t let him kill someone, lest he be disposed of. She let the thought cross her mind, even though things weren’t so cut-and-dried or easy to reason out for Harold.

Why do I always have to act so dirty whenever he’s involved? Aaah, I wish I could just wash this all away.

Echika bent down and took off her shoes. She walked barefoot along the sand, the chilly sensation sinking into her toes. The seawater brushing against the back of her hand was surprisingly cold. She took small steps forward, wary of the rolling waves.

“How is it? Pleasant, right?”

She realized Harold had turned to face her. His handsome features were shaped into a carefree smile. His lakelike eyes harbored a faint light—a light more innocent than glasswork.

Wash it all away? No. It only constricted her heart all the tighter. Just what was this?

“...It’s a little cold. I just realized that it’s below nineteen degrees.”

“That’s plenty warm.”

“If anything, I’d think it’s not cool enough for you.”

“Oh, yes. I miss winter already.”

“Just thinking about having to argue over the air conditioning with you makes me depressed.”

As she exchanged jabs with him, she unconsciously clenched the shell in her hand. Despite the pain of it digging into her palm, she resolved to ignore it. For now, at least.

Afterword

I'm so grateful to see Volume 3 published. I don't feel comfortable with repeating the same things I said in Volume 2, but the continuation of the series is all thanks to my readers' support. Thank you sincerely.

Volumes 1 and 2 are about people who are blessed by technology, so I thought this volume should deal with those who are not so fortunate... That was the idea. When the series got the go-ahead for continuation, I decided I wanted to delve into the negative aspects of the Your Forma device, hence the somewhat heavy themes. I hope it has touched your hearts, even if only a little.

Also, I would like to once again clarify that while this volume did draw inspiration from existing incidents, the events in this book are all fictional and unrelated to real persons or events.

Next, some thanks. To my editor, Yoshida. I am deeply grateful for your constant encouragement and support. Your passionate words on Liza during the planning stage helped me get a handle on her character.

To the illustrator, Tsubata Nozaki. Thank you so much for your wonderful illustrations; I always feel like they're much too good for this series. Bigga has matured as a character this time, and it's all thanks to your adorable designs of her that helped guide my hand.

To Yoshinori Kisaragi, the author of the manga adaptation. Congratulations on Volume 1 of the manga going on sale. I can't thank you enough for treating Echika and Harold so well.

I'd be pleased if you could continue following Echika and Harold's story in the future, too.

September 2021, Mareho Kikuishi

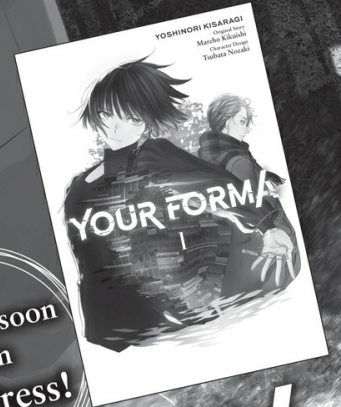
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